

 TOKYOPOP

THE ADVENTURES OF OVAM SVRK

MISATO IURAKAWA

OPAL OF ICE & SNOW



デュアン・サーク

D U A N S U R K 7

氷雪のオパール〈上〉

深沢美潮

Mishio Fukazawa

電撃文庫

デュアンサーク

D U A N S U R K 8

氷雪の
オパール〈下〉

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STORY
ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER I



And then, all of them—the king, the queen, the aides, the Black Knights, Duan, and the others, including K'nock and Check—were sound asleep. They fell into bed and into a deep, deep sleep—into a world of sleep where it was dark and warm and where all their fatigue melted away.

In their dreams, Charles was king. To his side stood Duan, who for some reason was dressed as a Black Knight—and not only that, he seemed like he was the leader of the Black Knights.

Duan and Charles were chatting happily as if they were friends. And Agnis was beside them, rolling about with laughter. (Who knows what was so funny?) Yes, Duan and everyone else were exactly as they are now.

If only Duan could be with me forever, thought Charles in his dream, knowing that it was only a dream.

When he awoke, it was evening, and it was already dark outside. In the dark bedroom, Charles bolted out of bed with

a terrible feeling. He quickly dressed and went to the living room—but Loren was the only one in the cozily warm room.

Charles asked in a hurry, “Um, where is everybody? What about Duan and the others? They haven’t left already, have they?”

Loren answered with a look of surprise, “No, I think they are still resting in the guest room.”

At Loren’s answer, Charles stroked his arm in relief before quickly looking up again and asking, “So, where is this guest room?”

“Are you going there, Your Highness?”

“Yes, I’d like say thanks, too.”

And I also want to ask about . . . that thing earlier . . .

Loren laughed. “There is no reason why Your Highness should go yourself. Please wait here while I go check on them.”

“Oh, okay.”

Charles sat down on the fluffy sofa, and Loren passed him a warm steaming cup of tea with plenty of milk.

“Th-thank you.”

“You are welcome. Well then, please wait here.”

Charles watched Loren leave the room, and then he put the cup to his mouth, remembering the battle from the night before—it felt as though it had been a dream.

First of all, Agnis came, and I spoke to her about the book and the devil Senzrabur. And then, I found out that her companions were arrested by the Black Knights and had been put in jail. I tried to talk to Father about it, but there were worse things happening. Father got caught in the trap that Schneider had set, and the castle was suddenly in a state of combat. When we went to talk to Grandpapa about it, Red Knights suddenly surrounded us. They were eerily strong, strange enemies.



Adventurer
Level
3
Valid until:
16th November
Sigress Year 383

Name

Duan Surk

Date of Birth: 16th November Sigress Year 366

Residence & Citizenship:
Kashibar 22-A, Florol

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Fighter

Issue date: 16th November Sigress
Year 382

Skill Points:

Strength...32 Intelligence...62

Karma...+4 Magic...10

Experience Points: 377
(Level-up possible at 500)

デュアン・サーク
Duan Surk

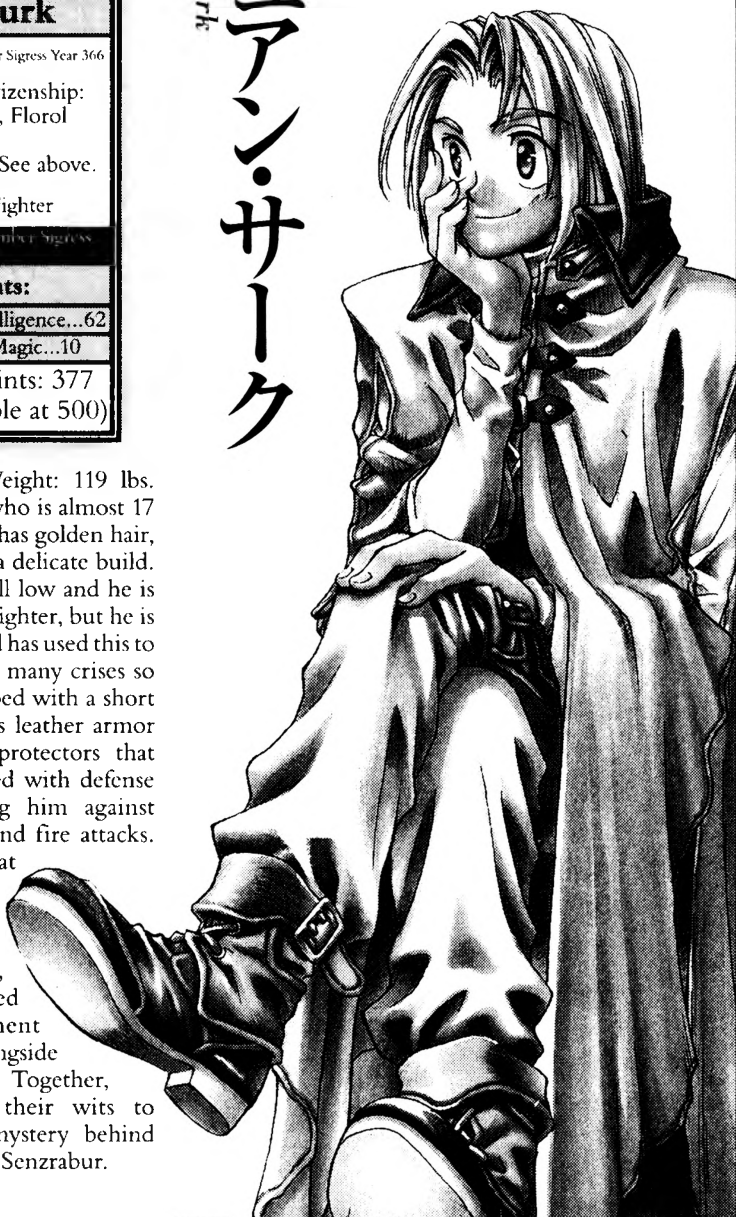
Duan Surk
Character File

Height: 5'8". Weight: 119 lbs.

An adventurer who is almost 17 years old, Duan has golden hair, green eyes, and a delicate build.

His levels are still low and he is an amateur as a fighter, but he is quick-witted and has used this to make it through many crises so far. He is equipped with a short sword and wears leather armor with shoulder protectors that has been fortified with defense magic, shielding him against regular attacks and fire attacks.

In the battle at the Silver-Gray Castle, he didn't have his own luggage, so he borrowed royal equipment and fought alongside Prince Charles. Together, they used all their wits to challenge the mystery behind sealing the devil Senzrabur.





Adventurer
Level
14
Valid until:
8th August
Sigress Year 384

Name

Olba October

Date of Birth: 8th August Sigress Year 359

Residence & Citizenship:
Nirgir 677-1-2, Varl

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Fighter

Issue date: 8th August Sigress
Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength...115	Intelligence...50
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Karma...0	Magic...0
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Experience Points: 4792
(Level-up possible at 5000)

Olba October
オルバ・オクターバ

Duan Surk
Character File

Height: 6'4". Weight: 180 lbs.
At 24, Olba is young, but he's a strong and skilled fighter with 13 years experience. He has dark eyes and long black hair, which he ties back. The many scars on his body tell the tale of his past grueling adventures. His weapons are a broad longsword and a dagger. He is armored with black chain mail and iron part protectors. He also wears black leather pants and boots with iron kneepads. In the battle of the Silver-Gray Castle, he used a longsword that had been handed down within the royal family, and he dressed himself in the sparkling silver of the royal army's full body armor. He fought heroically alongside Land and ran riot against the Red Knights. It seems that he and Sven, a company commander of the Black Knights, had traveled together in the past.



Duan Surk Character File

Check
チエツク



Height: 6". Check is a baby monster called a grinia, whom Duan has cared for almost ever since Check was an egg. The color of his body is emerald green and the tufts of fluffy hair on his head and the end of his tail are golden. His eyes are black. He speaks a little human speech clumsily, and he can cast some low-level healing spells. He is very curious and goes about checking everything—which is where he gets his name. He is a bad drunk.

Then, we went to the Silver-Gray Tower, where Father had retreated. And that was when I first spoke about the devil Senzrabur. Of course, nobody really believed me at first. But then, somebody identical to Schneider appeared, and suspicions were raised against the person we'd initially thought was Schneider. That's when we were found again. We had to pass through the secret passageway and hurry to the hidden room.

Agnis, Duan, Clay Judah, and I made our way to my room, where the book in question was, while Olba and Land held the Red Knights.

Oh yes, on the way we ran into a sorcerer, but we were rescued by Clay Judah. In the end, we weren't to be reunited with him until after dawn broke.

In my room, Duan unlocked the mystery of the book. And together, we left in the pouring rain to find the statue of the dog. Then, we defeated a Red Knight in the downpour.

After that, we came to the tall hedge that was difficult to climb . . . My hands were frozen, so in truth, I couldn't feel a thing, although it had really stung at first. Actually, I don't think I really noticed it because I was so preoccupied with what we were doing. But my palms were full of cuts and grazes and my heart was beating so loudly. It's the first time I ever felt that way.

I still can't believe it was real. Could I have really done all that?

Anyhow, we found the statue of the dog in the gardener's house—I wonder how that girl is? She's probably feeling safe now, making dinner with her grandfather.

When we finally had the statue of the dog and the book in our hands, we went back to Father to try and convince him to be bait to lure out Senzrabur. . . .

As Charles ran through each and every bewildering memory, he could feel excitement bubbling up inside him.

Not just anybody. I did it—I conquered it, with these scratched hands! And it was so difficult and dangerous. . . .

It was an incredible sense of achievement! He felt a sense of accomplishment that, with Duan's help, they had triumphed.

Charles took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly. He was in the mood for whistling. He was smiling to himself when there was a knock at the door and Loren returned.

Loren was on his own.

"Oh, where are they, Loren?"

Loren, still smiling, replied, "Come, Your Highness, we have to get ready."

"What?"

"It must have slipped my mind: The celebration ceremony is starting. We don't need to hurry, but Agnis and the others are busy getting ready for it, too."

"Oh, I see."



Adventurer
Level
4

Valid until: 2nd
June Sigress
Year 384

Name

Agnis R. Link

Date of Birth: 2nd June Sigress Year 367

Residence & Citizenship:
Fiana

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Sorcerer

Issue date: 2nd July Sigress Year 383

Skill Points:

Strength...21	Intelligence...44
Karma...+9	Magic...33

Experience Points: 599
(Level-up possible at 700 points)

An offensive magic sorcerer who only started adventuring half a year ago, Agnis, like Duan, is 16 years old. She has bright red, wavy hair that hangs down to her hips, and her eyes are like purple gemstones. Her mother was a Fire Elementaller, so she can cast high-level fire spells—but because her magic points are low, she cannot control her magic, which can be hazardous.

She is a princess from the Kingdom of Fiana. She and Charles have been friends since childhood, as well as pen pals. She enlisted Duan's and Olba's help after she received a letter from the prince. In the last battle, she discovered that her magic wasn't working anymore, something that troubles her.

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Agnis R. Link

Duan Surk
Character File





K'nock is a snow leopard—a legendary monster said to be able to use illusionary magic. He has a dazzling white fur coat with black spots. He can't speak human speech, but his intelligence is high, and he can fight using his ability to determine the weaknesses of the terrain or his opponents. He is always at Agnis' side and is her devoted knight.

Charles could see a bright fire being stoked outside the window. Looking down onto the inner garden, he saw many torchlights being lit, as well as a lot of people busily getting the banquet ready. He also could hear what sounded like the orchestra tuning up.

“Come, come.”

Hurried along by Loren, Charles slipped his arms through the silver and white sleeves of handsome ceremonial garments.

CHAPTER 2



Duan and the others were in the middle of getting changed in a spacious guest room. The people of the castle were making a big hubbub and fussing over them as if they were heroes—and Duan was treated especially well as he was considered the central figure.

The clothing that was brought out for them for the ceremony was incredibly luxurious, causing both Duan and Olba to regard it with wide eyes. Olba did not feel so enthusiastic about the vestments.

Additionally, *Master Check*—*Master Duan's* companion—well, he was made to wear a small jacket made in a hurry out of bright sparkling silk. Unlike Olba, Check was overjoyed. He stood in front of the mirror and danced and turned.

Duan and Olba put on slender trousers and jackets that came down to their knees, both made of white fabric with embroidery in silver thread. Under the jackets, they wore pale, cream-colored shirts with plenty of frills. And they also each wore shiny white boots.

“Are you guys ready? Man, can you believe this?”

The door opened and Land entered the room, dressed in the same style. Clay Judah was behind him.

The women of the castle who were helping Duan and Olba get dressed froze when they saw Clay Judah. Their mouths agape, they stared at him with looks of astonishment.

Seeing this, Olba and Land glanced at each other. Meanwhile, Duan, like the girls, was charmed by the sight of Clay Judah and gaped at him open-mouthed.

Clay Judah wore a long, dark blue velvet jacket, trousers made of the same cloth, and shiny black boots. His shirt was similarly luxurious, but it suited Clay Judah’s noble features.

Land, totally fed up at the attention given to Clay Judah, cried out, “It’s been this way for ages! They don’t even bother to look at me. Man, this blows!”

At this, all the women raised their voices at once in laughter. One shouted, “No, no—that’s not true. You’re good looking, too!”

“Oh really? Well, which cutie said that?” Land asked in reply, and the room filled with hysterical giggles and laughter.

Even Olba, who looked as though he’d had enough only a moment earlier, began



chatting up the girls. They responded happily, their cheeks blushing.

They seem so grown up, Duan thought as he looked on at a distance. Then, he remembered that Charles had promised to introduce him to some aristocrat girls. *I wonder whether he'll remember that promise?*

In contrast to the fuss rising up around the men, the guest room where Agnis was dressing was peacefully silent. Agnis, who had gotten changed into a magnificent dress studded with purple gems, was getting her hair put up while K'nock waited slightly away from her, lying on his belly. Her brilliant scarlet hair was wound up and clasped with a gemstone the same color as her dress. A smooth, shiny silk ribbon was woven into her hair and tied here and there to look like flowers. With her hair done like that, Agnis looked slightly grown up.

"You look beautiful."

The women who were helping her were the queen's attending maids. They sighed in appreciation over and over again. But Agnis sighed quietly for a different reason.

I wonder why I couldn't use my magic back then . . . Why? I just don't understand it.

She had tried to chant a spell just after she woke up. But this time, even her rod hadn't responded. And no characteristic wave had spread through her body when she chanted a spell, either. It was quite a big shock to her. It would've made sense had she not been able to use her magic only when she was tackling Senzrabor, as his magic powers could have been blocking hers. But in the end, she could find no reason why they wouldn't work at all. What had happened? She couldn't think of a single cause.

In fact, when I unleashed my Fire Magic on the Red Knights, powerful flames came out—but they did nothing to stop them. I wonder what that was about?

Agnis was confused. At that moment, the person who would've been able to give her the best advice was her mother, Rubis, who was a Fire Elementaller and might know something Agnis didn't.

Should I go back to the mansion by myself as soon as possible? Duan and Olba probably will stay here for a while. After all, the king and Charles would never allow them to leave so soon. And anyway, they probably would wait a little while for me if I asked. But . . .

There was a prick in Agnis' small heart.

What will that strangely charming warrior, Clay Judah, do? He attracts all who meet him. I could imagine him declining the king's and prince's demands and leaving as soon as possible. And then, I'd never meet him again.

These thoughts created such a longing in her that she felt her chest tightening. She had never felt this way before.

Is this what they call love? I've only ever read about this feeling in books, where all the young girls are crazy when it comes to love, even refusing to eat their meals.

Agnis had only ever been able to imagine it and had never quite understood it. But in the throes of it now, she despaired when she realized that it was not a fun experience at all.

She had imagined it would be fun—more like floating around on a rainbow-colored cloud. But now, all she could feel was pain—suffocating, sad, and helpless. She knew that, in Clay Judah's eyes, she was all but a child. He wouldn't even look at her. Yet being close to him was enough for her—all she wanted was to be near him for as long as possible.

I want to keep hearing his voice. I want to see his smile.

"Oh? Isn't this the popular *Star of the White Horse*? Is Your Highness reading it, too?"

She looked up in surprise at the sudden question, asked by one of the maids who was sorting out her clothes and belongings and held the book in her hands. It was the book that Manuela, the servant who had cared for Agnis since she was a small girl, had lent to her—the dramatic adventure story of a nobleman's daughter, Lulu Chatelaine.

Agnis remembered Lulu: At times, she was the Star of the White Horse, the warrior of justice feared by corrupt noblemen. But she was really a young girl who yearned after Andre Ruben like a brother and loved him enough to endanger her own life for him.

Agnis imagined Clay Judah's profile in the illustration of Andre. And just with that thought, her cheeks blazed up brightly. She couldn't sit still and was almost pulling at her hair that had just been beautifully arranged.

Gosh, no! No, no, no, no!

Seeing the princess in front of them blush, sigh, and stamp her feet, the maids-in-waiting tilted their heads and regarded one another with curiosity. K'nock looked up in worry, too, but when he found there was no real change in his master, he closed his eyes quietly and lay his chin upon his crossed legs.

There is no one as astute as a woman in love—the poets of the past weren't wrong with these words. Agnis' prediction was entirely correct.

CHAPTER 3



he celebration ceremony was held in the grand hall, where the Black Knights and the Red Knights had fought each other chaotically, all jumbled up.

With the torchlights and chandelier lit, the room looked suddenly transformed from the evening before: It was magical and beautiful, and everything sparkled. The location was chosen to accommodate the large number of attendees and also to commemorate the great fight against the enemy that had happened there.

A platform was raised next to the grand staircase, and the king's and queen's thrones were prepared there, with the obligatory red carpet laid on the floor at the foot of the thrones. The large, gorgeous chairs were cleverly decorated with golden designs, giving one the impression that they were extremely valuable.

Many, many people were waiting impatiently for the start of the ceremony. The trumpets sounded—was this the beginning? Like everybody else, Duan turned his head to look. He, Olba, and

the others were standing in place in front of the thrones, where they'd been made to wait.

The king, the queen, the prince, and the ex-King Liesbeck made their appearance at the top of the grand staircase.

The trumpet was soon exchanged for solemn music, and the royalty slowly made their way down the stairs. The Black Knights, the noblemen, Lord Schneider, and everyone else concerned lowered their heads deeply until the royal family settled down in their thrones.

This is amazing! So luxurious. So, this is a real palace!

Duan, also lowering his head, suddenly started to appreciate what was happening around him. Check, who was hanging on to his shoulder, opened up his big eyes and looked frantically around him.

When all the royalty finally were seated, the celebration ceremony began.

"After a succession of misunderstandings and confusion, major tragedy was surely on its way. Would the heroes who foresaw this calamity and rescued this kingdom from this predicament please rise," ordered the king in a slightly shrill voice.

At this, Edward Zamut, the leader of the Black Knights, lowered his head and announced the names in a resonant voice.

"Clay Judah Anderson."

A happy commotion welled up from the crowd.

Of course he'd be called first, thought Duan gladly.

Clay Judah bowed to the sides and behind him, and then he stood in front of the king.

"Olba October."

It was Olba's turn next. He looked a little embarrassed as he made cursory bows himself before standing next to Clay Judah.

“Land Boots.”

What? I didn't know Land's name was Boots! Duan looked at Land in surprise.

With a serious face, Land walked out and stood beside Olba.

Duan thought that maybe he'd be announced right about now, and his heart was racing—but it was Agnis who was next.

Of course it's her. I'm at the bottom of the ladder really. And I'm not a princess like Agnis. I'll be called last. Well, that's expected! Ha ha.

“Princess of Fiana, Princess Agnis.”

When Agnis was called, Duan looked at her in her dress and was deeply moved again. Well, he had seen it earlier and was impressed then, but he couldn't stop himself from sighing however many times he saw her in it. When she was dressed like this, she looked amazing and had a divine beauty about her.

And speaking of beauty—K'nock was beside her, straightening his posture. He had been combed down beautifully, and he sparkled in the light.

Wow—they look gorgeous. What a majestic world!

And just when he was feeling overwhelmed with excitement, he realized that everyone who had stepped out in front of him had turned around to look at him.

“What?”

W-what? Did I get called? Oh man, did I miss it?

He frantically stepped out, at which point everyone started to clap. And it wasn't just those who had turned to look at him, it was everyone who had gathered in the grand hall. To his surprise, the prince, the ex-King Liesbeck, the king, and the queen all stood up and started to applaud him, as well.

“What?”

Duan still couldn't understand what was going on. His face went bright red and he fidgeted. Without thinking, he touched his head with his hand. Sweat was pouring off the top of his head. He was almost at the end of his limit when Agnis thankfully motioned him toward her.

“Come on! Quickly!”

O-oh . . .

He hurried to her side and the clapping finally stopped. This time, in the order they were called, they stepped out in front of the king, who pinned a sparkling silver medal with a thick ribbon to each person's breast.

“Well done. For fighting, I thank you from the depths of my soul,” repeated the king to each of them. And then, he shook their hands firmly. Prince Charles and the ex-King Liesbeck also shook their hands, whereas the queen allowed each of them to kiss the back of her hand.

Wow—my heart is pounding again!

Duan could see Olba and the others also were blushing. And just as he was getting excited, it was his turn again.

The king attached the medal to Duan's breast and firmly shook his hand. Still holding his hand, the king looked around and spoke in a loud voice: “Although he is still young and is delicate-looking like a girl, he saved our kingdom from crisis. He used his wits and supported my son and devoted himself to the cause. If Senzrabur had managed to restore his full power and summoned the devil, then not only this country, but the entire world would have been destroyed. A congratulatory address has arrived from our neighbors and from King Tylus.

“From your neighboring country: Please receive our congratulations on the safety of your country and a prayer for continuing success.”

Still holding Duan's hand, the king looked at Schneider. Schneider matched the king's look.

"Damn Tylus, the nerve of it," said the king with a bitter smile. Schneider laughed in a similar fashion.

"Indeed. But never mind—it is not time for war now. Like Tylus said, let us restore our national power."

"Yes, so that he can't take advantage of us."

As the two of them laughed and agreed with each other, the ex-King Liesbeck looked on with a slight smile. He let slip a soft sigh and shifted his gaze to the Black Knights' leader, Edward Zamut, who smiled satisfactorily and made a small bow.

All the while, Duan, whose hand still was being held by the king, had nothing to do. The king noticed this and hurriedly spoke in a quiet voice, "Ha ha—sorry, Duan. I really am grateful to you. What with all that's happened, it's really opened my eyes."

And then, the king raised Duan's hand high into the air and announced, "Our nation will never forget his name: Duan Surk!"

All the people gathered in the grand hall started to chant Duan's name in loud voices.

"Duan Surk!"

"Duan Surk!"

"Duan Surk!"

"Duan Surk!"

"Duan Surk!"

Their voices resonated through the grand hall and took a while to die down. Although the temperature was cold enough outside to make one's breath white, the crowd was generating an incredible heat.

There was no greater honor than this. It was all too much, and Duan started to feel the inner corners of his eyes heat up.



His head was going blank, and he knew that he would collapse where he stood if he didn't focus. He withstood the feeling and looked around at his friends who were watching him: Clay Judah, Land, Olba, Agnis, and K'nock, too . . . they all were offering praise from their souls.

Oh yes, Check also was sitting cheekily on Duan's shoulder, accepting the praise from everyone with one hand raised.

Duan looked at Prince Charles last. He also was clapping happily, and when he felt Duan's gaze, he smiled sweetly. They conversed eye to eye: *We both did well. Bravo!*

Charles was a prince, and Duan was only an adventurer, but together they were already something more than that. Together, they applied their wits and overcame crises and fought danger. . . . They were *friends*.

CHAPTER 4



The formal ceremony came to an end and a lively party began. The grand hall, the inner garden, and the surrounding area were used and a great banquet was held. Daughters of noblemen and ladies wearing beautiful dresses were laughing together here and there. In one corner of the grand hall, a splendid table was arranged and luxurious food and expensive drinks lined it. A candle stand was placed upon the table, which made the cloudless polished silver gleam. Duan and the others were dining at that table. Around the great oval table sat Clay Judah, Land, and Olba, and also Duan, Agnis, Prince Charles, and Sven Giesen. They were an eye-catching bunch, and the table drew attention. K'nock was, of course, right by Agnis' side, looking extremely content while being fed the finest quality meat. Check, still in his grand clothes, also stationed himself on the table, grabbing everything around him that took his fancy, stuffing himself. Of course, he downed his favorite booze, too.

"This is delicious!" Duan was thoroughly appreciating each bite of his meal, which didn't smell like it was rotting, unlike the prison food.

"Duan—gosh, you're just eating and eating," commented Agnis.

"Of course he is—our hero of today!" teased Olba, holding a teriyaki chicken drumstick in one hand and a mug of beer in the other.

"S-stop it, Olba—you too. I just don't know what to do."

"Hey, here they come again!" called Charles.

"What?" Duan turned around and found three noblemen's young daughters standing there, wearing dresses like flowers. They giggled with one another and shyly looked at Duan and the others.

"Um . . ." started one.

"May we," continued another.

"Have your autograph?" finished the last, after which the girls descended into giggles and embarrassed laughter. The three of them held hands and danced around in circles.

Wow, they're so cute and girly! How sweet!

Duan couldn't prevent a grin from spreading across his face, although he could sense the considerable displeasure coming from Agnis next to him.

I can't help it. They are really cute. Agnis is cute, too, but she has such a strong personality.

It was actually the third time that a group of girls had come to request autographs. Although most came for Clay Judah's, they also wanted Duan's. As they approached, Duan could smell an indescribable sweet scent, and he also caught a glimpse of slightly exposed soft, plump white breasts—and with that, he thought he might faint from excitement.

Man, this is the life! A big difference from the old maids at the bars Olba takes me to.

Agnis watched Duan as his eyes gravitated toward the girls' chests time and time again. "Jeez, you're an idiot, Duan. All they've done is pulled them together and pushed them up. Anyway, I'm sure they've stuffed their tops."

Hearing this, Clay Judah spurted out some air. Agnis' face started to go bright red.

"And aren't you doing exactly the same thing?" commented Olba, after which Agnis hid her own chest. It was true—she was wearing a dress that emphasized her chest more than usual.

"B-b-but this is a dress that was given to me by the queen. I didn't choose it myself. And it was the maids who put it on me, too," she cried desperately, sneaking a peek at Clay Judah. He was still smiling and laughing.

Oh no! Why did it end up like this? I'm so embarrassed!

Agnis, still bright red, was looking down when Charles asked everybody, "So, what will everyone request for your rewards?"

Duan looked up quickly. Yes, after everyone received a medal, they each were told that they could receive one prize of their own request. Except Duan—they already had prepared something for him.

"Duan, what a success. Suddenly a baron! Oh no, I suppose I can't address you so informally anymore. I'll have to call you Baron Surk," joked Land.

"Please stop. It seems as though I now have more reason for people to make fun of me. I would have preferred something a little more practical, too," moaned Duan.

"Don't be stupid," Olba responded. "A baron? A baron! Do you know how much it would cost you if you tried to buy a

title like that? And anyway, as a baron, you'll get land, too. And that means you'll get land tax. Hey! That's a fixed income!"

"Yeah, but I'm an adventurer. It's not like I'm going to settle down here, nor am I originally from Orland," replied Duan.

Charles' face went pale. Without noticing, Duan proceeded to ask Sven Giesen, "I suppose if I receive the title and get land, that would mean I'd have to reside here and serve the king? And if there were an emergency, I would be summoned?"

"Hmm, that's probably true as a general rule. You should ask the king frankly. I'm sure he'll say there is no obligation. I think this is purely a way of showing his gratitude."

"I see. In that case, I should confirm this later. But how would I go about doing it? I couldn't possibly ask him directly."

"Not to worry—I will request an audience through Commander Zamut."

"Th-thank you!" replied Duan with a relieved expression.

Sven smiled and nodded in response.

After a pause, Duan looked at the others and asked, "So, have you all decided what to ask for?"

Land, who had been goofing around, replied with a straight face, "I know what I'm asking for. I want to request my withdrawal from the Assassin Guild."

CHAPTER 5



Everyone who was there knew Land used to be an assassin, because he had confessed all and entrusted himself and how he should be dealt with to the ex-King Liesbeck. In the end, the ex-king received him as a state guest. That was Land's answer. But there was still one problem: It was unlikely that the Assassin Guild would let go of Land so readily.

There was a short silence, with the only sounds being Check stuffing his mouth, the surrounding hubbub, and the elegant melodies emanating from the court orchestra.

It was Olba who broke the silence. "Yeah, it would have been difficult without the strong backing of the king. You're lucky."

Land winked. "Yeah, I think it was lucky that I met this guy. I really didn't owe him anything, but I felt like following him."

"This guy" was, of course, Clay Judah.

I can understand that, thought Duan from the bottom of his soul. *There's something about him that's alluring*, he thought, although

it remained unclear to Duan what Clay Judah was thinking or what sort of person he was. Ultimately, Duan decided to question Clay Judah when the time was right, because Duan made up his mind to be a sorcerer warrior like him.

When Duan had been training to become an adventurer, the examiners had told him to choose the path of sorcerer, because his intelligence was absurdly high, and he had a bit of magic power. People who possessed magic power were rare, so they were valuable commodities. Magic was more powerful than any weapon, and it could both control and fascinate people. It wasn't surprising that the examiners pushed with all their might for Duan to change his direction. At the time, however, Duan had felt so strongly about becoming a fighter like his brother, Gaeley, that he was annoyed by the examiners' advice. He had been inexperienced at that point, though, and hadn't known the amazing power of magic. It was understandable—he had still been just a child.

He felt differently about magic now. During the fight with the powerful witches, Ogma and Samra, he witnessed firsthand the power of magic. The Hydra, the Griffin, and the Minotaur . . . the spells that summoned the great legendary beasts were terrifying—but at the same time, their force was so exciting that they made his body tremble. There was also the astounding two-headed wizard with whom he'd journeyed to the Island of the Red Dragon; the extraordinary might of Golden Eye's and Silver Eye's combat magic; and, of course, Agnis, with whom he traveled, who could manipulate powerful magic, as well.

When he thought about it, he felt lucky to have had the opportunity to meet people who possessed this rare talent, not to mention people with such high levels. But they were purely sorcerers, not fighters. And because the image of his brother,

armored, and with sword in hand, was burnt into his memory, Duan resisted the idea of donning a sorcerer's robe.

After meeting Clay Judah, it felt as though a door had opened in front of him.

Of course! he'd thought. There is also the path of a sorcerer warrior!

Witnessing how cool Clay Judah was as he wielded his sword and broke the spell of the Magic Wall impacted Duan's mind to the point that it went blank. He was so fascinated and charmed that he was blind to everything else.

I want to follow him! I want him to teach me magic. Duan's head was full of thoughts like these.

What would Olba do? Olba is Olba. He'd probably go out on quests alone like he used to before he'd met Duan. But Duan thought that he'd like to team with Olba once again, if possible. Not merely as a caddy or someone who got in his way.

"Me? Hmm, let me think . . ." Olba was talking about the rewards. He rubbed his chin and grinned. "I think I'll ask for a horse. The horses here seem good. And maybe some equipment—but I don't want any of that golden junk."

Sven Giesen interrupted him. "Why would you say that? It suited you! I would love it if next time you could wear that flashy tasseled helmet!"

"No friggin' way. How are you doing, by the way? All right?"

Sven still was pale, but he nodded in response. "Yeah. And I think I'll be allowed to rest for a while. Land, you too—our doctor was saying that you need a little rest, and that you shouldn't be drinking."

Land, had been about to pour himself another glass of wine, stopped momentarily, thought again, and then continued pouring. "Right. Tell him I'll cut back on the drink."

Sven laughed. "Roger. Well, you have good sense to choose a horse. Our horses are excellent, especially the ones that would be given to you as a gift. If you sold them, you could fool around for a whole year."

"That would be nice, too," replied Olba in a half joking, half serious kind of way. He then turned to Clay Judah. "So, Mister Clay Judah, what are you getting?"

After finishing his glass of crimson wine with a glug, Clay Judah wiped the wine from his pale lips with a napkin. "Let's see. I think I'll ask for a horse, as well. I've recently separated from a horse I'd been riding a while."

Clay Judah had exchanged his horse with someone before he left for the swamps, where the monster Saras lived. A horse was an indispensable item to an adventurer going on harsh journeys.

"H-hey, you're not planning to leave soon, are you?" Land straightened up and moved closer to Clay Judah. "Can't you stay here until my wound is a bit better? Please?"

Land put his hands together, but Clay Judah shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, but I'm going. If I can have a horse, I'm hoping to leave tomorrow."

"What?"

"*What?*"

"W-whaat?"

Land, Agnis, and Duan let out a simultaneous scream at Clay Judah's words.



CHAPTER 6



After raising their voices in unison, Land, Agnis, and Duan stood up instinctively. Clay Judah looked at them round-eyed. The trio exchanged glances for a moment before peering at Clay Judah again, but they didn't know what to say.

Duan was confused, and Agnis was at a loss for words. In fact, there was nothing that really *could* be said. So, all they did was stand there.

Finally, Land said, "See—they're opposing it, too. Don't be cruel. Stay a short while . . . four or five days, maybe," he begged.

Clay Judah, looking troubled, stared back at him, and then at Duan and Agnis. "Land, how long do you plan to stick with me? I don't remember agreeing to team up with you. And I don't think your wound will make a complete recovery in four or five days," said Clay Judah.

But Land, unperturbed, replied, "That doesn't matter—whether you want it or not, I will be journeying with you for a while. That's what I've decided."

Clay Judah laughed bitterly and sipped his freshly poured wine. "That's unreasonable."

"Pah! Call it what you want. It's fine. If you're leaving tomorrow, I'm coming with you."

"With *that* wound?"

"Yup. Even if it opens up or goes bad—whatever, man. But don't worry, I won't come and haunt you if it kills me."

Clay Judah didn't respond. This time, he turned toward Agnis and Duan, wearing an expression that seemed to ask, "Why, you two?" They were both bright red and still standing, looking down at their feet.

Olba, who had noticed Agnis and Duan were both being extremely bashful, said teasingly, "Hey, are you two about to confess your love for him or something?"

"C-c-c—"

"C-c-connnn—"

In their stuttering, they sounded not unlike a pair of clucking chickens. Duan's and Agnis' faces were getting hotter and hotter, but were still frozen.

But I'm the guy here. Duan decided to speak out first. He thrust up his head and looked at Clay Judah directly in the eyes. "Um, I have something to ask you."

Clay Judah looked at Duan with exceptionally kind eyes—eyes that calmed him and gave him courage.

"I-I want to be a sorcerer warrior like you!"

Everyone around remained silent and focused on the two of them. Only Olba poured himself another glass of wine, sipping it slowly, as though he weren't listening.

"So, uh, I was hoping you could tell me how, or . . ."

The courage he felt earlier evaporated. His head slowly sank, and his voice became quieter and quieter.

But then, Clay Judah said something unbelievable: “Okay. I was thinking of going to visit my Master of Magic next, anyway. I have something I want to ask him. I can take you with me.”

Duan opened and closed his mouth and swallowed his spit several times in disbelief. He never imagined that Clay Judah would agree so willingly. And now, he was going to accompany the sorcerer warrior to see a Master of Magic! Overcome with pleasure, he continued to stand there, motionless, his mind once again going blank.

He finally returned to his senses, bowed his head, and said, “Th-thank you so much!”

Clay Judah laughed and stopped him. “No, no, it’s okay. I’m going, anyway, and I think you have potential. If you didn’t, I wouldn’t take you, no matter what. So, instead of thanking me, you should thank your own talent.”

Having listened to this transpire, Land, looking confused, asked, “Hey, so what about me?”

“You should stay here until your wound heals.”

Land smiled in response to Clay Judah’s words. “Fine. You two go visit your Mister Magic or whatever. I’ll wait here with Olba.”

But Olba, still drinking his wine, said, “Don’t be stupid. I’ll leave when I leave. I won’t go tomorrow—I’ll rest a while first—but I’ll go when I find a good quest.”

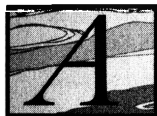
Duan gazed at Olba. *I guess he wouldn’t wait for me.*

Duan knew that it would happen eventually, but now, when their separation had become a reality, it was truly heartbreaking.

Olba didn’t even look at Duan as he continued to eat his meat and drink his booze silently.

Taking it all in, Land’s expression turned sour. His embittered look seemingly fixed, he asked Agnis, “So, what was your question?”

CHAPTER 7



fter first biting her lip, Agnis composed herself, before saying to Clay Judah, "Can you take me, too? I haven't been able to use my Fire Magic. I want to know why that is, so I'd like to meet this magic teacher!"

Clay Judah examined Agnis, and then he dropped his gaze. He glanced up at her again, choosing his words carefully as he replied, "Fire Magic . . . I see. In that case, I don't think my master's magic is the same type as your magic. Let's say, as different as oil and water. I don't think he'll know what the reason is."

"It doesn't matter! If he doesn't know, he doesn't know. I'll decide what to do next!" Agnis continued desperately, but Clay Judah silenced her by raising his hand.

"The journey to the Master of Magic's house is certainly not easy. We'll be passing through dangerous places where there are monsters. And it's arduous. I think the trek would be difficult for your legs, because you're a woman, and still young."

Still young . . . ? Agnis was so mortified that she had to hold back her tears. With a shaky voice, she said, "If you're saying that I'm still a child, then I say Duan is the same! And in terms of strength, I can't imagine that there is much of a difference between him and me."

"What?" Duan, suddenly dragged into the conversation, stared at her, wide-eyed.

"Even though I'm a woman, I'm a fully fledged adventurer. And my levels are higher than his. *And* I have a companion called K'nock. I won't be a burden to you. Please take me. If I do get in the way, I won't mind if you leave me behind!"

Hearing his name, K'nock looked up from where he was sitting at their feet.

Olba took this opportunity to take a quick jab at Duan. "Man, she's dragging you down, isn't she?"

Clay Judah stared back at Agnis with a troubled expression, but he finally answered with a nod. "Fine. But on one condition: Please remember what you just said. If I decide that things are getting too tricky, you must agree to go home without question."

Agnis let out a huge sigh. Although somewhat relieved, there was something that bothered her that she couldn't shrug off—it was the way that Clay Judah spoke to her. She wondered why he was suddenly speaking to her so formally.

It wasn't as though they had engaged in many conversations, but she was fairly certain that Clay Judah used to speak to her more casually, and with the same tone of familiarity he'd used when talking to Duan and the others.

Oh, why am I bothered by such a trivial detail? It was so unlike her. Agnis lowered her gaze and bit her lip.

Duan closely studied her pale profile, perplexed.

After having listened to the whole progression of events, Land interjected with a loud clap. "I've got it. This is what we should do: If this princess is going with you, you'll surely send her back home. Can't you drop by here when you do? And Olba can stick around, too. Then, you can team with Duan again. Perfect, eh?"

"Leave us out of this. It's none of your business," exclaimed Olba.

Land shrugged. And then, with a suddenly serious expression, he drew closer to Clay Judah. "But if you're *not* gonna come back this way, then, like I said earlier, I'm coming with you, even if it means I'll be holding my wound shut as I walk."

Clay Judah sighed. "Why are you fixated on coming with me?"

With great sincerity, Land responded, "Well, that's because the god inside me is telling me to go."

"The god inside you?"

"Yup. Inside. There's a god inside me that's mine alone." Land struck his chest. "And he says to stick around you for a little while longer."

"Okay." Clay Judah thought about it briefly, and then he smiled at Land and laughed. "Then it can't be helped. Although I can't promise to come back here, I will make an effort to let you know my whereabouts."

Hearing Clay Judah's response made Land's face brighten. "Great! That's settled. Now, I'm getting hungry!" Land made a fist around his fork and started to shovel food into his mouth.

CHAPTER 8



ltimately, it was decided that Duan and Agnis would go with Clay Judah to visit his Master of Magic. Agnis would have liked to discuss things with her mother, Rubis, first, but she thought that Clay Judah wouldn't let her come at all if she admitted that, so she dared not mention it.

Duan was worried about Agnis because she seemed so preoccupied, her face full of worry. But now that they would be traveling together for a while, he thought she would probably talk to him about it at some point.

The room that had been prepared for Duan and Olba was a two-person bedroom on the floor above the prince's room. As Duan got ready for his journey, Olba lie on his side on the spacious king-size bed with his eyes closed. Check was helping Duan—or at least Check thought he was helping.

Getting ready for his journey didn't amount to much, as Duan didn't have that much luggage. He did, however, assemble

pots and crockery for three people. Besides that, he had only the foodstuff that Loren had prepared for him. He quickly finished packing his bags, and all that was left to do was to inspect his weapons and equipment. He wiped the dirt off the recently purchased leather armor and polished it.

Duan looked over at Olba, who was sleeping on his bed. Olba was the one who had chosen Duan's armor for him, from the small equipment store in Corbenia. Agnis had given them a ring as a fee for traveling with her to the Witches' mansion, and after cashing it in, Duan used his share of the money to buy the armor.

He initially had refused to buy something so expensive, but Olba had urged, "Learn to protect yourself. You need good armor to do that. And it should be common sense to have good defensive gear when you're at a low level."

"This is great!" Olba had continued. "We're lucky that we found something so good so quickly. I know you probably wanted a chain mail or a plate armor or something, but I'm not sure you could have taken that weight! Well then, next, it's weapon time. Nothing too fancy, but we should at least buy a secondhand short sword. And we have to train for a while. You have to at least be able to kill the smaller fish for me."

Olba's statements replayed in Duan's head as though he'd just heard them, suddenly causing him to become overwhelmed with emotion.

"Um, Olba . . . ?"

There was a hesitant knock at the door.

"Yes?" Duan replied.

He opened the door to find Charles standing there. Duan invited him in, but Charles remained firmly planted, looking anxious.

“W-what is it?” Duan asked. Charles surveyed the room, and when he saw Olba lying down on the bed, he drew back.

“S-shall we go to Your Highness’ room?” suggested Duan.

Olba abruptly got up and said with a snuffle, “I get it. It’s fine. Let me get out of your way.”

Charles shook his head in disagreement. “It’s okay. I don’t mind if you stay. Duan, I want to talk to you about something. Actually, I want you to do something for me.”

Duan stood upright and nodded. “I see. What is it?”

Staring at his feet, Charles asked, “Duan, you’re planning to go on a journey with Clay Judah, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I intend to.”

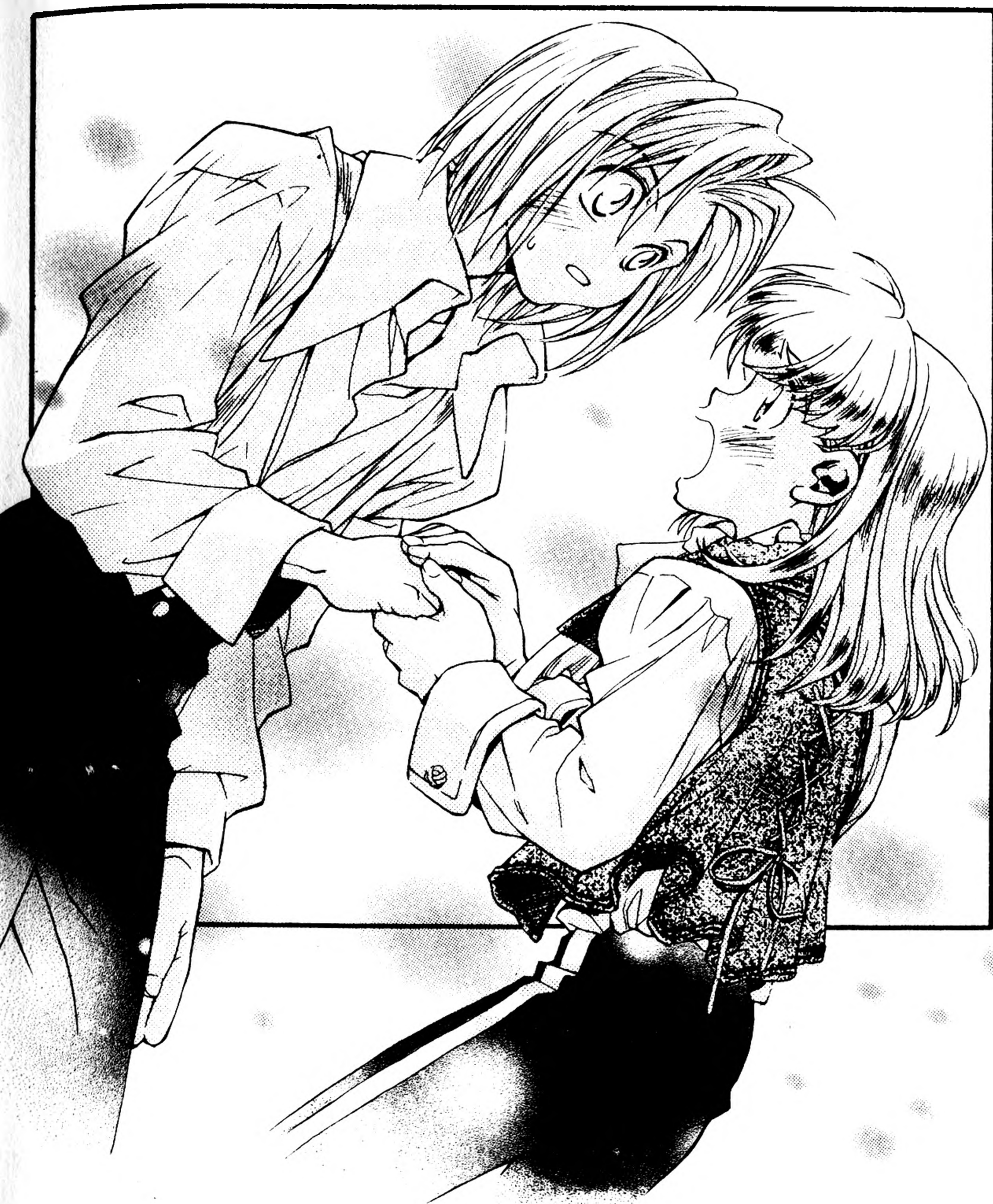
As he looked up, Charles grabbed both of Duan’s hands and held them in his own. “Please don’t go.”

“W-what?” Duan didn’t understand what Charles was trying to say.

“Basically, I want you to stay here,” Charles declared, with a hint of anger in his voice. “It won’t happen for a while, but I will probably take the throne one day. And until then—no, even beyond that, I want you to stay and help me—but not as an aide or anything. If you wanted, I could assign you to the Black Knights. You could practice your swordplay and study magic whenever you desired. I’ve even thought about calling in an expert sorcerer as soon as possible. And speaking of which, we don’t have a resident sorcerer here in the palace. It’s a problem, right? Even more so when things like last night happen.”

“U-um, Your Highness . . . ?” called Duan, but Charles wasn’t listening, and he continued on with great intensity.

“I had a dream, and it felt real. I was king, and you were the leader of the Black Knights. Agnis was there, too.



Isn't that amazing? I woke up from the dream and thought, 'That's it! The dream is a premonition. This is the future I've been searching for.' I'm not very good at making friends—or rather, there were never people around me that *could* be my friends.

"Duan, you're the only one besides Agnis with whom I can talk so openly. Oh, and if it's all right with you, I thought you could start using the room next to mine. And we could dine together. You're a hero in this country now. They'll allow that, I'm sure. Although you've recently received a title, so it wouldn't be bad to visit your land. Oh, have you been yet? If you haven't, I could take you there now. I often used to go there when I was little . . ."

There was no end to Charles' speech. When Duan tried to say something, Charles carried on as though he were purposely neglecting giving him a chance to speak. Duan, looking bewildered, glanced over at Olba, who had gotten up from bed and sat down on a nearby sofa. He squinted at Duan with one eye open.

They both were speechless. Regardless, Charles droned on.

"Oh, yes. Duan, I promised that I'd introduce you to a nobleman's daughter. I, um . . . have someone in mind. She's really cute. And she comes from a good home—and she's good-natured . . ."

With no end in sight, Duan decided that, first and foremost, he had to stop Charles from talking. He placed his hand on Charles' shoulder.

"Your Highness, please listen to me," Duan spoke assertively.

"Oh, it's okay. If you don't like her, you can tell me after you've met her. I'm sure she might—"

"Your Highness!" Duan shouted.

Charles finally shut his mouth; a puzzled expression twisted his face. He looked up at Duan and pleaded, "Duan, I beg you! Please don't go. Don't be an adventurer. Just stay here."

Charles' lips trembled slightly, and he looked as though he were about to cry. Duan couldn't bear it anymore. He was so honored by Charles' request that it almost brought tears to his eyes. However, Duan already had made his decision. *The Clay Judah* said himself that he'd take Duan along to meet his Master of Magic. And Duan also wanted more experience as an adventurer. And on top of that, he also wanted to reunite with his brother, Gaeley, one day.

Duan bowed his head deeply and said, "Your Highness, I'm terribly sorry . . ."

Charles opened his mouth as if to say something—but seeing Duan, still with his head bowed, he stopped short, dropping his shoulders. With his mouth firmly shut, he left the room.

The sky visible from the windows of the room was like Charles' countenance—dark and cloudy, and about to start weeping at any moment.

CHAPTER 9



lay Judah and Olba were given horses as a reward, but Duan was granted a horse, as well. In actuality, he was given ten or so horses; they came with the land that was bestowed upon him when he received his title.

The land was located west of the Silver-Gray Castle, and situated on it were a small hill, a running river, and—although it was old and not that big—a grand mansion. There were also agricultural plots, where people busied themselves with farm work, as well as pastures, where cows and horses leisurely roamed and chewed grass.

Duan chose a chestnut-colored horse with kind eyes. Its special attribute was that its face alone was partially white—a sight beyond description. In one respect, it was really cute. Although some might consider it a bit odd-looking, somehow, when you looked into the horse's face, it generated such affection that you couldn't help but sigh. It had a seemingly lively demeanor and trotted merrily with great ease, too—at least, in that particular

instance. In spite of its perceived sunny disposition, the horse actually possessed an unruly temperament that would later cause a lot of difficulty.

Clay Judah had a blue-haired horse with a jet black sheen to its coat, and Olba's was fawn-colored. The horses were so well bred that if their owners sold them, they could live like kings for nearly a year. Clay Judah's horse was especially valuable—it possessed a calm nature and didn't scare easily. It also was extremely brave, and was a warhorse suited for battle.

When Duan heard that Clay Judah had named his horse (Air), he immediately copied him. Duan called his horse Judith, a sweet name for a mare.

Unlike the others, Olba didn't name his horse. "You'll be selling it soon enough," said Olba. "You might get too attached if you give it name." He patted the horse's back. "Right, horse?"

Duan thought he should get Agnis a horse, too, and offered her a few he chose from the farm on his land. However, she immediately declined—she had K'nock, after all. But Duan worried that if Agnis were the only one not traveling by horse, she would struggle—especially when they encountered obstacles, such as crossing a river.

"Well, when that happens, she can ride on Air with me. She seems lightweight, so I can't imagine he'd make a fuss about carrying another person," Clay Judah laughingly responded.

When Agnis heard this, she turned bright red. *Ride a horse together . . . That probably would mean I would sit at the front and Clay Judah would sit behind me . . . !*

She screamed silently, and her thoughts began to race at a frantic pace. Agnis had already had enough of horses—but under these circumstances, another horse wouldn't be a problem. In fact, it would be a welcome dream come true.

If Clay Judah's going to let me ride with him when we cross rivers, maybe he would let me ride with him during other parts of the journey. If I'm traveling alone with K'nock, it's fine, but when we're traveling with others, they're much too fast.

Agnis let her mind wander and explore different scenarios, but in the end, she decided to ride a horse. She knew that she wouldn't be able to act like herself if she rode with Clay Judah, and she was terrified of exposing her feelings to him and Duan. When Agnis told Duan that she did want a horse, he helped her choose one that was relaxed.

She eventually chose a female horse that was snow white, as K'nock was, and named her Jocca. Yes, it was the same name as that of the beloved horse the heroine Lulu Chatelaine owned in the book *Star of the White Horse*.

Once they both had horses, Duan and Agnis frantically began learning how to ride. Agnis was fed up with riding after one failed attempt, but the second time went better than expected. Jocca was, without question, an excellent horse, but Agnis didn't want to be left behind by Clay Judah, and that accelerated her progress.

Duan desperately tried to master riding alongside his driven counterpart—but unlike the intelligent Jocca, Judith was moody, even though she seemed so docile when Duan had chosen her. There were times when she listened to him—but more often, it seemed as though she completely forgot that she had Duan on her back.

"Why don't you choose a different horse?" asked Agnis when she saw Duan having problems getting Judith to obey him.

Duan shook his head. "I've chosen her already—I can't change now. I'm sure in time she'll accept me."

Hearing his response, Agnis thought how quintessentially Duan it was.

In the end, they devoted two whole days to riding practice. The prince avoided them completely as they prepared for their journey. According to Loren, who visited the stables, Charles had shut himself away in the library to read books.

Agnis wondered what was wrong, and Duan told her about his previous exchange with the prince. When she heard his story, her round eyes grew even bigger, and then she sighed heavily.

"Oh, no wonder he's shut himself off. Thinking about it from Charles' perspective, he must have squeezed every last drop of courage he had to ask you that. Just when I thought he was able to talk to someone other than me . . ."

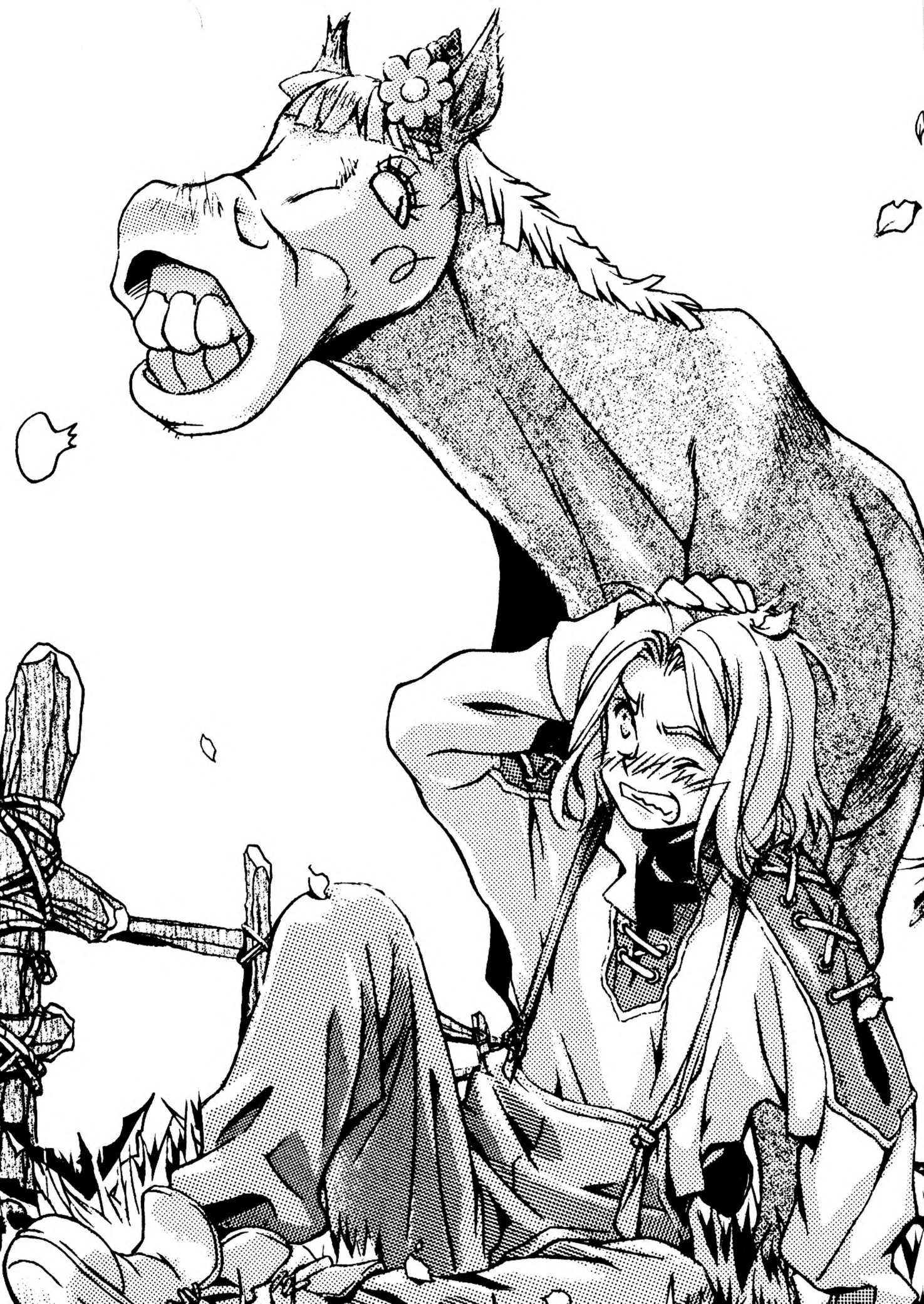
"I couldn't help it! I can't imagine joining or even being accepted into the Black Knights, can you, Agnis?" asked Duan. At that moment, a group of Black Knights passed right behind Duan. Watching them walk past, laughing exuberantly, their muscular builds all in their uniform black armor and helmets, Agnis nodded in agreement.

"I suppose so. It wouldn't be possible. But Charles also said that it would be okay if you stayed as a counselor, right? At the end of the day, all he wants is his new best friend, Duan, to stay close by, no matter what you were to choose to do."

"Hmm. And I'm honored, but—"

"But I suppose it's not up for discussion. Just when you were on the road to becoming an adventurer, and just when you had the opportunity to become a sorcerer warrior . . . Never mind, there will be plenty of times when things won't go as you wish. That's how you grow up—getting a little stronger each time. Charles too!"

Duan snickered at Agnis, who was being unusually mature. Sharp-sighted Agnis caught him and jutted her lip



out in response. She laughed immediately afterward, though, jumping onto her snow-white horse, Jocca, and leaving.

She's different now, thought Duan as he watched her beautiful red hair cascade down her slim back.

Oh well, I'm sure if there were something she wanted to talk about, she would, he thought, and then he gently kicked Judith's side.

Judith unexpectedly bucked several times.

"Argh!"

Duan was flung off onto the grass.

"O-owww . . . What are you *doing*?" He glared up at Judith with hate-filled eyes, but she regarded him coolly. Unfazed, she concentrated on the delicious grass at her hooves.

CHAPTER 10



he day of departure came in the blink of an eye. It was three days after Clay Judah first mentioned visiting his Master of Magic, who lived on a mountain. Although Agnis and Duan would have liked to practice riding a little more, they accepted the fact that the rest of their education would come from hands-on experience.

“Please have a safe journey. I looked for Prince Charles, but unfortunately could not find him,” the Prince’s attendant, Loren, said regretfully.

The leader of the Black Knights Army, Edward Zamut, and company commander Sven Giesen were present at the side. They already had bid farewell to King Evesrin, the queen, and the ex-King Liesbeck.

“Master Duan, thank you for all your hard work,” said Edward Zamut.

With words like that from the leader of the Black Knights Army, Duan didn’t know what to say in return. All he could do

was apologize. "I'm sorry. And I received a title, too. Is it really okay not to return it?"

Edward laughed, revealing his bright white teeth. "I trained as an adventurer when I was young, as well, so I understand your feelings. And King Evesrin said not to worry; your title was meant more as a gift of gratitude. Anyway, I wish you luck—you should experience all you can. The experiences you have when you are young are the toughest and cannot be substituted with anything else."

Edward shook Duan's hand firmly. Duan was so overjoyed that he enthusiastically shook Edward's large, calloused hands in return.

"Take care, Duan!" Sven patted Duan's shoulder, and the two also exchanged a solid handshake.

"So, you swear, right? You'll get in touch?" Land grilled Clay Judah. Clay Judah laughed in response.

Duan wasn't able to look at Olba squarely in the eye. If he looked at Olba, he'd have to say his farewells. And if he said his farewells, he'd feel as though he'd never see Olba again. But he hadn't even thanked him yet. It was Olba who picked him up, lost and hungry to the point of starving, in the Witches' Forest, and taught him how to live as an adventurer . . . taught him how to live as a man.

Duan didn't know his mother or father, and it was his brother, Gaeley, who had cared for him like a parent. Perhaps, over time, Duan had subconsciously superimposed his brother's image onto Olba. He felt that he would regret it forever if he didn't say anything now.

"Hey, good luck, man."

Duan felt a hearty slap on his shoulder, and he looked up in surprise.

Olba laughed confidently. His hands were like large gloves—hands that had saved Duan so many times. They'd rescued Duan from falling to his death from the cliffs in the dungeons of the Red Dragon. They'd grabbed him and pulled him back to safety.

Duan's eyes went misty. Olba peered into Duan's face curiously.

"Hey, what are you crying for?"

"Friggin' heck, don't you know you're not supposed to make girls cry?" teased Land. Olba looked at him with an unappreciative glare.

Duan closed his eyes and tried with all his might to stop his tears. And then, after vigorously rubbing his eyes, he looked at Olba. "I-I . . . don't know what to say . . ."

Just as he had gotten that far, they heard Loren cry, "Prince Charles!" When they whipped around, they saw Charles running toward them, nearly out of breath.

"Duan! Agnis!" Upon arriving in front of everybody, Charles was panting heavily, his shoulders noticeably rising and falling.

"Your Highness!" Duan ran to him and Charles placed his hand on Duan's arm.

"Duan, we'll meet again, right?" Desperation filled Charles' eyes.

He wore a spotless stark white shirt and an elegant blue-gray jacket on his slim body. The wounds from the other night were still there on his hands.

Duan took his hands and smiled. "Of course, especially now that Orland is my second home country!"

Charles' eyes lit up like fire. "Oh, right! Of course, that land belongs to you now. If you don't come back from time to time, the mansion will be in poor repair."



“Yes, exactly.”

“Agnis, you look after yourself, too. Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Agnis was wearing slender pants for horse riding, and on top she wore a wine-colored jumper skirt. Underneath, she wore a dark pink blouse, and over all of it she wore a gray cloak with a smoky-pink underside.

“You too, Charles.”

Clay Judah summoned Agnis and Duan, who were reluctant to leave, “Okay, let’s get going. Goodbye!”

After exchanging farewells with Charles and the others, the time to depart finally had arrived for Duan, Agnis, and Clay Judah, as well as the two animals in their company, K’nock and Check.

CHAPTER II



With Clay Judah riding the blue-haired Air, Agnis riding the snow white Jocca, and Duan riding the chestnut-colored Judith, the group exited the castle gates together.

Agnis' and Duan's bums were so sore from the two days of horse riding practice that they found the pain difficult to bear, and the pace with which they rode reflected their timidity. K'nock traveled beside them, and Check was holding on to K'nock's back—probably because Check didn't want to ride a horse that was moody and unpredictable.

Duan had left the castle behind him, but he looked back once more. Charles, Loren, and the Black Knights' leader, Edward, were still waving as Land, Olba, and Sven discussed something or another. Observing the scene, Duan cried out to his group, "I'll be right back!" and kicked Judith, retreading his course alone.

Judith obeyed him for once, and managed to successfully change direction on the first attempt, even though she hadn't

previously mastered such a task. She even galloped and stopped with ease.

Charles regarded Duan, who had suddenly returned, and asked him, curiously, "What happened? Did you forget something?"

"No . . . well, yes."

Duan dismounted his horse, and with a click of his leather boots, walked toward Olba.

"Hmm? What's up?" asked Olba, who had a rolled cigarette, which was now dangling from the side of his mouth—unlit because he was trying to kick the habit.

Duan stood in front of him and thrust down his head. "Thank you very much!"

Olba scratched the tip of his nose and laughed.

Duan continued passionately, "If I hadn't met you, and if you hadn't taken care of me, I would have died. Even if I had made it alive somehow, I wouldn't have progressed, raised my levels, or gone on any adventures. I would have been a vagabond, at best. I might have even given up adventuring. I didn't tell you until now because I simply didn't know the right way to say it."

"That's not true," replied Olba.

"What?" Duan raised his head.

Olba sighed and studied Duan. "You would have made it by yourself."

Sven attempted to clarify Olba's point for Duan, who looked confounded. "Duan, this guy was bragging about you when we were fighting that never-ending battle with the Red Knights. He insisted that his partner would strategize and prevail—that you weren't merely a weak kid. That's really something coming from Olba, so I thought you must be pretty reliable."

Duan glanced at Olba with a look of utter surprise.

"Yup, that's true," Olba said. It doesn't matter about levels and stuff—don't worry about things like that. You're traveling with *the* Clay Judah now! I don't really know much about him, but he's no ordinary guy. He's bigger than that guy you managed to seal in the inner gardens. You met him under these circumstances, and now he says he'll take you with him—don't waste that opportunity."

Duan must have recited Olba's words a thousand times over in his mind. But more than his words of encouragement, Olba calling Duan "my partner" resounded the most.

Arriving at a loss for words, Olba instead gave Duan a bear hug with his husky arms. "Have faith in yourself. Let's meet again in one piece!" Olba said.

Tears trickled down Duan's face. Without shame, he clung to Olba like a little weeping child.

CHAPTER 12



arewells are difficult," concluded Clay Judah, addressing Duan from nearby.

Agnis cried sympathetically, although she didn't completely understand why Duan found saying goodbye so upsetting. She was also upset to part ways with Olba, but there was no doubt in her mind that she would see him soon. "He'll see Olba shortly. We all will. Why is he getting so distressed? It isn't as if we're saying goodbye for good," Agnis said.

"I'm sure this trip means an awful lot to Duan," replied Clay Judah. "I think that's why he's feeling so emotional about it. Farewells are farewells."

"Clay Judah, have you experienced a lot of difficult farewells?"

"Why, yes. I've lived this way for eight years now . . . I've experienced countless farewells." An air of sadness accompanied Clay Judah's admission.

Agnis felt her chest tighten as she noticed his melancholy expression and wondered which particular farewell provoked such emotion.

Oh, it doesn't necessarily mean it's someone special, Agnis reminded herself. Why do I get so caught up in these silly details? I've never been like this before.

"Um, before we start on this journey, I have one thing to ask of you."

"What is it?" inquired Clay Judah.

His response sent Agnis' heart racing. She lowered her gaze and noticed her hands trembling furiously. *Why is this happening to me? Why, why, why, why . . . ?*

When she was with Clay Judah, the question "why?" seemed to crop up countless times. Making sure not to stammer, Agnis carefully declared, "Um, I would prefer that you didn't speak to me so formally. You can be more casual, similar to the way you speak to Duan."

Clay Judah acted slightly surprised, but he eventually broke into a smile. "That's fine, Agnis. In that case, you can speak less formally to me, too. We're both equals."

Happiness welled up from deep inside Agnis' heart. "Yes, okay!" she agreed.

CHAPTER 13



'nock and Check led the group, followed by Clay Judah, Agnis, and Duan. They journeyed this sequence with *relative* ease.

The highway that extended northwest from Orland eventually transformed into a forested path that went deep into the woodlands, and then suddenly evolved into mountainous terrain. As the elevation increased, the cold became increasingly bitter.

Agnis and Duan had become accustomed to riding, but Duan's horse, Judith, was predictably temperamental, obeying him at times but not at others—hence the *relative* ease with which they had traveled so far.

“Honestly, can't you at least walk in a straight line? All you've been doing is going from side to side!” complained Duan.

Her mind flitting aimlessly, Judith went wherever she pleased. If she saw a butterfly or fancied taking a whiff of some grass, she followed her desires. And if there were a small rock, she would avoid it at all costs, no matter how diminutive its size.

"I told you so. Why didn't you just change horses?" teased Agnis with a laugh.

"Duan, horse makes a fool of you, Giis!" Even Check was laughing now.

Duan sighed deeply and said, "Yeah, I'm seriously thinking that I should have done that." As soon as he uttered his words, Judith froze on the spot.

"What? Oh, c'mon, Judith, I was only joking. Go!" But however much Duan pleaded with her, she refused to move.

"You've gotta be kidding me. Hey! Please walk!"

Duan kicked her side once, but Judith became even more unresponsive. Her mind was fixated on the velvety grass in her midst, which she was intent on eating. Completely unaware of her true priorities, Duan and Agnis assumed that Judith felt bad about their conversation.

"Oh, please! I'm saying I'm sorry," pleaded Duan as he sat impatiently atop the unpredictable mare. With no progress in sight, he got down from the horse, half-weeping, and pulled on her reins.

But Judith was far stronger than Duan anticipated. She wouldn't move an inch and dismissed Duan all together. Check tried to tug on the reins with Duan, to no avail.

W-what shall I do?

Clay Judah, who was ahead of Duan, patiently waited for him without complaint, but Duan felt so bad about falling behind that he couldn't bear it. And anyway, Clay Judah must have his limits, too.

Just as Duan was pondering his options, including leaving Judith behind, Clay Judah descended from his horse and quickly edged his way toward Judith. She was eating grass and ignoring Duan until Clay Judah whispered something into her ear. At first, Judith looked surprised, but then somewhat



enticed, as she leaned her ear closer to Clay Judah. She abruptly stopped eating grass, shook her body, and then looked at Duan as though nothing had happened.

"It's fine now. She'll walk for you," Clay Judah reassured Duan as he walked back to his horse.

Duan skeptically climbed onto Judith's back—and to his surprise, she proceeded to walk.

"Um, can you speak with animals?" asked Duan.

Clay Judah snickered. "It isn't that I can speak with animals—the truth is that animals can understand what we say."

"Is that true?"

"Yeah, why don't you try it? You have to speak from the heart and believe that they can understand you. In most cases, it works."

"Wow!"

It seemed true coming from Clay Judah. But the truth was in the evidence, not in the theory—and that temperamental Judith was walking very happily now.

"What on Earth did you say to her?" asked Agnis.

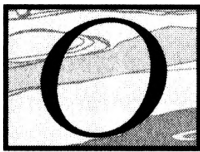
Clay Judah raised the corners of his mouth into a smile, but proclaimed with a straight face, "It's a secret!"

He even makes jokes sometimes! Agnis thought, astounded.

With this small discovery about animals, Agnis and Duan felt their spirits soar up into the blue sky.

They had gone to great pains to travel with Clay Judah, so they should have been enjoying his conversation and company more, but neither Duan nor Agnis knew what to say to him. So in the end, they chatted nonsense, and Clay Judah watched them happily. . . . Even with this little episode, Duan and Agnis were overjoyed.

CHAPTER 14



On their journey, they stayed overnight once or twice at inns suited for adventurers. Of course, Agnis didn't complain—on the contrary, she took the initiative to blend into that kind of place. And because there was only one room to spare, Agnis shared with Clay Judah and Duan.

Agnis shook her head at Clay Judah, who look troubled. "I'm fine in the same room. There are three beds, right? We can save money, too—it'll be fine."

"Okay. Yeah, I'll have them get out an extra bed. Are you really sure?"

Even though they had promised each other that they would be less formal when conversing, Agnis was still a princess of a whole country, and for that reason, Clay Judah was still being careful.

It was a source of both happiness and worry for Agnis that he was being so thoughtful. She wanted him to treat her the same

way he treated Duan. So, to show them that she was really okay with it all, she used crass words on purpose, and even changed clothes in front of them, pretending not to be bothered.

Duan was surprised at this change in attitude and was a little flustered by it—after all, Agnis stripped down to her underwear right in front of his eyes!

“H-hey . . . Agnis . . . um . . .”

Compared to the embarrassed Duan, Agnis looked fine. She placed a hand on K’nock’s head and said, “What? If you’ve got something to say, spit it out. Man, you’re irritating!”

“Man? Irritating?”

The words Agnis used were getting cruder and rougher.

Duan noticed his language had been getting worse, too, under Olba’s influence, but he was a guy. For Agnis to be talking like Olba was altogether unnatural. Duan was worried and cast a glance toward Clay Judah, but Clay Judah didn’t notice Agnis’ unnatural behavior, nor was he really bothered by it; instead he was chatting with her now in a very natural way.

Of course, Check and K’nock treated her no differently, either. In fact, Check seemed as though he was getting along with her even better than before.

So, Duan thought that he might as well not say anything. *She probably won’t continue this way for long.* Sometimes she would inadvertently talk politely, and then correct herself on purpose. *At this rate, she’ll get tired of it and quit.*

In the next inn where they stopped, though, there was a small incident. The inn was built on the middle of a mountain path. It was very small: The second floor was the inn, and the first floor was a cross between a bar, a diner, and a shop. They were eating a late dinner there, and most other customers were rough men who looked like bandits. They weren’t travelers or adventurers, rather men who lived close by.

The other customers started to make a pass at Agnis, who clearly didn't belong there.

"Hey, hey, girlie. What are you doing in the middle of nowhere?" They exhaled their smelly alcohol breaths at her and brushed against her shoulders and arms, both accidentally and on purpose.

"Yeah, why not join us for a drink to commemorate our meeting? You'll drink with us, won't you?"

Their eyes were red and tired, but their fat, tattooed arms were many times bigger than Duan's, and they were more muscular. And the reliable K'nock had been refused entry, as the barman asked the group not to let such a dangerous animal into the place. (He finished his dinner first and was waiting in their room.)

"Please stop! Can't you see she doesn't like it?" cried Duan, using every drop of courage, as per usual, as he stood in between Agnis and the drunkards. Although, in all honesty, he knew that he could depend on Clay Judah if it all went wrong.

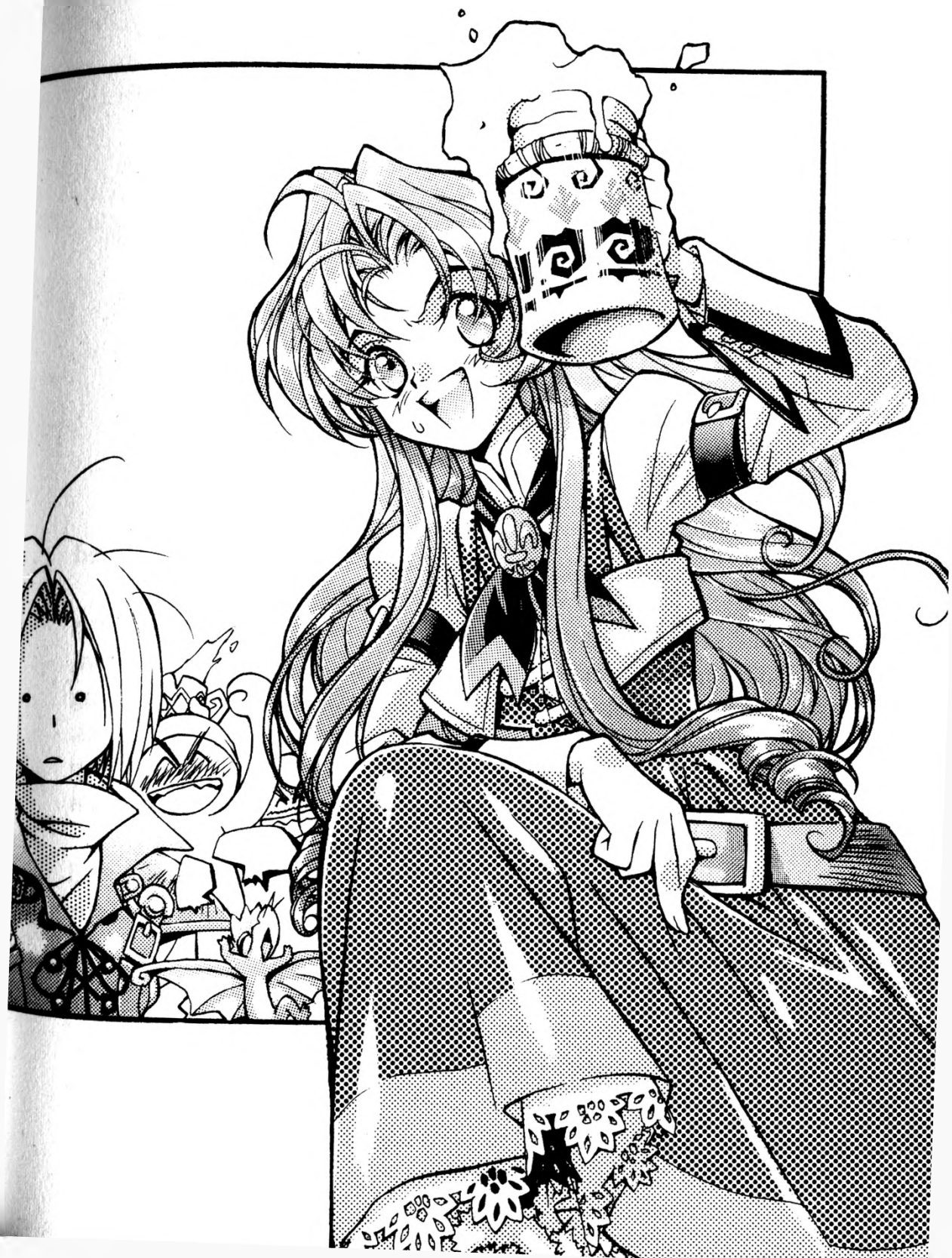
"Shut yer mouth. You look like a girl. Don't you think you'd suit a skirt more than armor?" yelled one of the unruly customers.

"Ha ha! You're a lot prettier than the girls around here. Why don't you come and keep us company?"

They teased him unmercifully. Duan went red to the tips of his ears and was so angry he couldn't say a word. And just when he clenched both his fists and decided to finally retaliate, Agnis stood up and said to him, "Hey, what you talking about? I'm not bothered! Hurry up and get them some drinks!"

She gave a backward glance at Duan and shouted toward the rowdy men, "Let's party tonight!"

The men, who were overjoyed by this, shrieked with joy and started some music, and the party lasted late into the night in the small inn in the middle of the mountain.



CHAPTER 15



he next day, Duan, Agnis, and Check were piled into one bed, sleeping soundly.

In another bed, Clay Judah, looking cool, was breathing quietly in his sleep. When the light shone in from the plain inn's windows, Clay Judah woke up. Without moving his body, he looked at Duan and the others with only his eyes. They had sunken to the bottom of the sea of drunken sleep and tiredness. He chuckled lightly, got up, and started to dress himself. The easily awakened K'nock got up, too.

"Can you wake your mistress?" Clay Judah asked K'nock, who went to Agnis straight away and tugged at the hem of her skirt.

But there was no way Agnis would wake up with just that.

K'nock, after thinking a short while, lifted his front legs onto the bed and started to lick Agnis' face.

"Mmm . . . mmm . . . K'nock, stop it. I can't drink anymore."

Still in a dreamy sleep, she mumbled nonsense and turned over. But Duan was there and her hand landed smack on his right cheek.

"O-owww . . . S-stop it . . ." Duan said, without making an effort to wake up.

K'nock looked back at Clay Judah as if he were asking him what to do.

Clay Judah put his hands on his hips and said in a loud voice, "C'mon, get up. I'll leave you behind if you don't!" His voice carried surprisingly well, and Agnis and Duan both woke up with a jolt.

Duan's arm was near the area of Agnis' breasts so, unsurprisingly, she let out a shriek. "Pervert!"

Her voice painfully echoed around their hungover heads. Duan, who was screamed at right by his ear, was in pain, but Agnis held her head in her hands in pain, as well. Amid all this racket, Check still made no signs of waking up.

Duan and Agnis wearily got ready and ate breakfast, in spite of the fact that they felt awful. They really didn't feel like eating, but Clay Judah told them to eat properly, so they had no choice. They left early in the morning.



"C'mon, you can do it. We'll be there by evening," Clay Judah encouraged as he mounted his jet black horse, Air, and took the lead.

The mountain path got steeper and steeper, and they could see snow here and there at the sides of the path. The breath of both the humans and the horses was white. It was a sharp, flesh-biting coldness, but Duan and Agnis were almost grateful for it, because the cold brought clarity to their fuzzy heads. But they still struggled, and in the end, their shoulders

drooped, and they had to try their very best not to fall off their horses.

Along the way, the snow got deep, so they changed their horses' shoes into ones that were made for the cold weather. Air and Jocca made no complaint, but Judith, as always, was troublesome. It wasn't because she disliked walking the snowy path, but because the snow was so fun that she couldn't contain herself, so she hurried from side to side, kicking the snow.

"C'mon, enough already. I don't even have energy to get angry," said Duan in a weak voice. But Judith simply looked back in disdain, refusing to listen to what he said.

And just when he thought, *I'm running behind. I better catch up with them*, there was a commotion from where Clay Judah and the others were. Duan could also hear Agnis' short screams, but trees obstructed his view and he couldn't figure out what was happening. Duan kicked the side of Judith's belly with all his might and frantically trotted up the mountain path.

At first, it looked only like clumps of white snow—countless big clumps of snow that were trying to attach themselves to the horse. But Duan saw Clay Judah kicking them off while still astride his own horse, his longsword glinting in the light.

"It's a monster!"

Duan's heart rate suddenly accelerated. "Agnis!"

When he finally got there, Agnis looked at him with a tearful expression.

"W-what are they?" she cried.

It wasn't surprising that they looked like snowballs. They were about three feet tall, had round body shapes, and were covered in stiff white fur. They had large mouths that were so wide that they almost looked as though the snowball had been broken clean into two hemispheres. And sharp teeth were jam-

packed into those bright red mouths. Each had two eyes, which were eerily red and looked about rapidly, not settling in one place. One had to wonder whether they could actually see very well. Attached onto each of these large snowballs were large arms and legs, with about ten shining sharp claws.

K'nock kept them away with a menacing look as they were trying to attach themselves to the horse, but there were too many to one. When they charged from all directions, even K'nock was overpowered in battle. And to make matters worse, although they were only circling Agnis and Clay Judah at this point, they were, no doubt, thinking about making their move, and were probably now watching for a time to pounce. It was just a matter of time.

"Argh! Get away! Get away from her!" Duan tried desperately to break into the circle that the monsters had made around Agnis. The circle was getting smaller and smaller. Judith didn't like this, however, and she stopped moving.

"Hey—come on! Not at a time like this! C'mon!" Blood rushed to Duan's head.

Shoot! This is no joke! Man! He thought for one second about jumping off his horse, but thought otherwise when he looked down and saw the monsters swarming. Without thought, the energy drained from his body.

Idiot! There's no time for fear! he lectured himself. But at that moment, one of the monsters attacked him with its sharp claws. He was a moment too late in returning the attack, and the claw tore through his pants.

Urgh! A stinging pain ran through his leg—but thankfully, it wasn't too deep a wound, and there wasn't much blood. The relief didn't last long, though. Terror struck Duan. For some reason, his arms and legs were paralyzed as if frozen.



CHAPTER 16



uan!" called Agnis, but he only had enough strength to move his eyes toward her.

"Duan, calm down," he heard Clay Judah urge.

"You've just been poisoned by the geniroe. It'll go away soon."

"What? Geniroes? Th-that's not right . . . these guys are white," proclaimed Duan.

Duan knew about the monsters called geniroes. They were *that* infamous. But they were covered in black bristle, and it was said that they lived much closer to villages, and also in dungeons.

"These are called snow geniroes; they're the type you find in colder areas. It isn't only their color that's different, they're also a few levels higher," explained Clay Judah. As he rode Air back down the path, he called to Check, "Hey, Check! Come!"

Check was surprised that Clay Judah called his name, and he pointed to himself questioningly.

"Yes, you! Quickly! Grab my shoulder or wherever!"

Check, still unclear about what was happening, flapped his pale wings and flew over to Clay Judah's shoulder. When Check was a short distance away, Clay Judah said to him, "Now, I need you to make a big hullabaloo. The snow geniroes have bad eyesight, but they respond to noise."

"Okay, giis!"

Clay Judah replied, but Check was still unsure of what was happening. He knew that all he had to concentrate on was shouting, though, so he started to shriek, "Danger! Danger! Danger! Danger!" with all his might in a high-pitched voice.

"Well done, that's it," Clay Judah praised.

And then, to their surprise, all the snow geniroes that had been circling Agnis and Duan changed direction quickly and started to make their way toward Clay Judah and Check.

"I see. That's what his plan is . . ." Duan mused—then, one of the geniroes turned to look at him for a moment.

"If you know what I mean, then don't make a sound!" ordered Clay Judah in a sharp voice.

Duan nodded. The geniroe that had turned back was now heading toward Clay Judah again.

"Duan, when you can move again, run with Agnis toward the top of the mountain," Clay Judah yelled. "K'nock, please guard them!"

This time, he spoke with a softness and warmth. K'nock, instead of nodding, aggressively raised his nose into the air and situated himself right next to Agnis.

Without a sound, Agnis mouthed, "Duan, are you all right?"

Duan checked his fingers. Although they were still tingling, the sensation had returned. Duan nodded, his face still reflecting his pain. He and Agnis looked toward Clay Judah simultaneously. After Clay Judah had drawn them farther down

the mountain, he deftly steered Air and kicked them away. Air was, indeed, a warhorse.

Clay Judah kicked away the snow geniroes that were trying to attach themselves to his back legs and then threatened the ones to his side. With not a moment to lose, he thrust his sword and swiftly cut them in half. He killed countless geniroes all by himself. However, their numbers were increasing: More enemies arrived from deep inside the forest.

Duan was making his way up the mountain when he found that he couldn't bear it any longer, so he made Judith make a U-turn.

"I-I think I'll go help him out!"

"Well, I'll come with you!" Agnis started to make her way back, as well.

"H-hey, no, you wait here with K'nock!"

"No. Why? He's fighting all alone." Her purple eyes glared as though they were on fire.

What to do? If we go together, we'll just get in the way. But I know we can't just leave Clay Judah here in danger by himself. Maybe we could make a noise from a different direction and draw them away. . . ?

Duan looked around. On either side of the winding mountain path were deep forests. The scene was speckled with snow, and there seemed to be a little wind shaking the branches of the trees.

I've got it . . . It just might work.

Duan devised a plan and said to Agnis, "To be honest, I think if we went now, we'd only end up getting in the way. But I have an idea. Could you wait here with K'nock? I promise I'll be right back."

Agnis couldn't exactly refuse. It was sad, but true—if the two of them went, they would get in the way. *And Duan sounds like he has a good idea.*

"Okay," she consented. "But try to come back as quickly as you can."

Duan noticed that Agnis had returned to her regular style of language and smiled.

"Okay, let's go, Judith," he commanded—and surprisingly she did as she was told.

Judith galloped down to where Clay Judah was, and the ring of snow geniroyes disbanded when they heard the sound of her hooves.

"Why did you come back?" Clay Judah screamed in disbelief. Duan didn't answer, but continued to descend the mountain path until Clay Judah appeared small in the distance; then, he got out three portable pots and spoons from his backpack. He tied a rope to each one and attached them to the branches of the trees on the sides of the path. As soon as he did this, the first spoon crashed into its pot, which was swaying in the wind, making a loud noise.

"Good, good."

Duan assessed how well the pots worked, and then he ascended the mountain path as fast as he could. He passed Clay Judah on his way up. Just as he had predicted, some of the snow geniroyes had started to move toward the sound of the pots.

"This is our chance—let's run! We'll be waiting at the top!" he called to Clay Judah, and then he returned to where Agnis was waiting.

CHAPTER 17



In spite of how long they waited, Clay Judah did not return.

"What's happened?"

"I . . . I don't know. That's strange. I cleared out the snow geniroes, so he should have come back a lot sooner."

They couldn't even hear battle sounds from below. All they could hear was the strengthening wind through the trees. When the sun was finally overhead, Agnis cried, "I can't bear it anymore!" She got on her white horse, Jocca, and K'nock followed after her.

"W-wait!" Duan followed behind her.

Soon, they arrived at the place where Clay Judah had been fighting earlier. There were some snow geniroes lying there, their toxic blood flowing out onto the snow. Duan saw some hoof steps, and he followed them farther down the mountain.

Agnis and K'nock trailed behind him. After a while, they arrived at the place where Duan had tied the spoons and pots up in the branches.

"O-oh my goodness!"

Agnis looked wide-eyed in amazement. Duan, too, was so stunned by the dreadful sight that his mouth fell open, but no words would come out. The place had turned into the site of a cold-blooded massacre. In the middle, was Clay Judah, his noble face filled with exhaustion and his cheeks covered with the blood of the snow geniroes.

Who knows how many dead bodies there were—but it wasn't solely Clay Judah who was fighting. He was accompanied by the mountain men who had been drinking and partying all night at the bar.

"Kiddo, you're late!" They looked tired, as well, but their combat with the snow geniroes showed how alert they were.

"Watch out!" One man leapt out in front of Agnis to prevent one of the snow geniroes from trying to jump onto her horse, Jocca. The man walloped it with a heavy-looking war hammer. Another thump, and the snow geniroe slumped its body.

However, new opponents with sharp claws were heading his way from behind. The man was frantically trying to avoid them, but he lost his balance and fell to his knees. Two snow geniroes came for him with their mouths wide open to their ears, aiming for his arm. They revealed their terrifying fangs and bit into him.

"*Graagh!*" The man was losing consciousness as a result of the pain and numbness.

At that moment, K'nock sunk his teeth into the shoulder of the snow-geniroe that was biting the man. This time, it was the snow geniroe's turn to scream. K'nock, using unbelievable strength, shook the snow geniroe from side to side as though it were a rubber ball. When he confirmed that the snow geniroe was dead, he quickly returned to Agnis' side and resumed guarding her.

Of course, Duan was trying to fight, too. He had his sword ready, but somehow couldn't find a moment to venture in. Before he even swung his sword, one of the other men already would make a successful attack and he'd lose his chance.

About an hour passed in battle with the snow geniroes. Together, Clay Judah, K'nock, and the mountain men had killed a countless number of them. The men panted white clouds of breath. They all collapsed onto the ground, and next to the corpses of the snow geniroes, they closed their eyes and wheezed.

Clay Judah was the same. He was slumped against a tree beside the path and was closing both his eyes.

Agnis got down from her horse and ran to him. She picked up some snow in her handkerchief to wet it and placed it against Clay Judah's forehead. He quickly opened his eyes and grabbed her slender wrist.

Agnis, surprised, looked back at him wide-eyed.

When Clay Judah realized who it was, he closed his eyes again.

Duan finally spoke. "Why? Why didn't you run? Why did you have to kill the snow geniroes that were drawn to the sound of the pots, as well?" he asked frankly.

It wasn't Clay Judah who answered him, but one of the other men. The man, whose face was covered with thick facial hair, opened his eyes wide and glared at Duan. "All geniroes—not only snow geniroes—they all have to be exterminated."

"Exterminated?"

"Yeah. Don't you know what these bastards like to eat?"

"N-no, I don't," admitted Duan.

"Children. Babies. To make it worse, babies that are still soft. They'll eat bear cubs and foxes, too—but their favorites, above everything else, are human babies."



Then, one of the other men who had collapsed on the ground suddenly got up and said, "Look at their mouths. Babies are turned into pulp in no time in those big mouths with their sharp fangs."

He spoke in an unusually high-pitched voice, causing Duan to envision the scene. Chills went down his spine. "That's why you have to exterminate them," he whispered.

"Yup. This is the law of the mountain. No, it's common sense. Although by the time we got here, this man had gotten through most of them by himself," he said.

But Clay Judah shook his head. "No, you really helped. It wasn't too hard, thanks to you guys."

"Ha ha! What modesty, what modesty! But I'm sure all the snow geniroles in this area are totally exterminated now. Thank goodness."

Duan, while listening to their conversation, quickly untied the pots and spoons that were still making a noisy racket on the branches of the trees and put them back into his backpack.

Meanwhile, Agnis was still wiping Clay Judah's face with her handkerchief. He gently stopped her hand and then combed back his hair. His hair was so wet with sweat that it stayed combed back. It accentuated the elegance of his face and he looked more mature. He stood up and dusted himself off.

Clay Judah's black horse, Air, quickly drew near. He leapt on and said to Agnis and Duan, "Let's hurry. We'll be in trouble if the sun sets." Agnis and Duan swiftly mounted their horses.

"Take care," called out the men.

"Okay, then. Thanks," replied Clay Judah. But they shook their heads. "Nah, thank *you* for protecting our forest."

Clay Judah smiled, and then gripping Air's reins, he traveled up the mountain. Duan and Agnis frantically followed behind him.

The men called to them from behind.

"Come and join us again on your way back!"

"Yeah, lady, let's party again!"

Their voices echoed around the now-silent mountain path.

CHAPTER 18



What the heck did I just do? Made some noise to distract them and run? What a pointless thing to do. Clay Judah could have run if he had wanted to. I'm sure he didn't need my help.

If Olba were present, he would have been lecturing Duan by now. But Clay Judah was unperturbed, as though nothing had happened, so it was even worse for Duan.

I was too forward. And what the heck did I accomplish? I couldn't even kill one of them. I just stood there the whole time, while the men and K'nock gave such a performance.

He had been treated as such a hero at the Silver-Gray Castle, but he felt as though this incident had reconfirmed that he was no such thing.

I knew it already, but it's still sad.

He sighed deeply a couple of times when Check fluttered toward him and asked, "Hey, why the long face?"

"No reason," sulked Duan. Check landed and gripped onto his shoulder. Duan thought that maybe he'd start to bug him, but instead Check said nothing and clambered into Duan's backpack.

"Check, what's the matter?" asked Duan, but there was no reply. After a while, he heard a light snoring sound.

I bet he's tired. I'm sure he screamed a lot when Clay Judah told him to earlier.

And with this thought, Duan felt blue again.

Even Check is being useful. What the heck am I doing? Baron Duan Surk?

His face immediately went bright red.

If I ever return to the Silver-Gray Castle, I'm going to return that title as soon as possible. I have no right to it!

CHAPTER 19



At around the time the sun was low in the sky and the shadows of the trees and horses were growing long, the world had turned into a silver wonderland. The mountain path was already gone, and they made their way through the trees that were dusted with bright white snow. The snow was so deep that it reached the horses' bellies.

"Come on, you can do it. Just a little more." Clay Judah turned around every so often and shouted words of encouragement.

However, neither Duan nor Agnis had the spare energy to reply. The horses worked desperately, too. Their breath was fluffy and white, and they climbed the mountain with utmost effort.

All that kept Duan and Agnis going were the words "just a little more" from Clay Judah—it kept them clinging onto their horses for dear life.

Only K'nock, who was, of course, a snow leopard, appeared to take the trek with ease. From time to time, he was at the front, then switching to the back to watch out for them.

They finally arrived to a slightly open place. It received the light of the sun, and the white snow on the trees sparkled. It was so brilliant that Duan and the others couldn't bear keeping their eyes open. Clay Judah jumped down from Air's back and, plowing through the deep snow, made his way toward a tree.

Duan and Agnis frantically followed after him.

Where is this Master of Magic? Where is his house? Duan pondered. What is he like? If they call him a Master of Magic, he'll probably be old. Actually, I don't even know whether it's a he or a she.

Duan and Agnis watched Clay Judah, curiously, as he stopped in front of a giant frost-covered tree that was almost like an ice sculpture.

I get it. The tree is the house? thought Duan.

Clay Judah directed his gaze toward the tree and called in a loud voice, "It's been a long time!"

What?

Duan and Agnis exchanged puzzled glances.

What, what is this guy saying? It's a tree, right? It isn't one of those trees that speaks, right? The ones in fairytales—the spirit of the trees?

Various thoughts ran through Duan's mind as he looked up at the giant tree. Then, suddenly, he heard the sound of the tree's branches cracking.

"Whoa!"

"Aah!"

They retreated without thinking, because all the snow that had fallen on the tree was swiftly coming down in a mini-avalanche. Everything around them had turned white, and Duan couldn't see in front of him because of the snow. After a while, the sound died down.



With a little squinting, Duan could make out something that looked like legs—although it was all white and covered in frost. He looked up slowly and saw something that appeared to be large hands; they were limply hanging down both sides. He then became frightened after seeing something that looked vaguely like a human face.

It was a completely white, large face, with long, bumpy clumps of hair weighing it down.

Icicles and frost were crammed into what looked to be the eyebrow area. The creature strained to lift its eyebrows. Directly beneath its eyes opened up, followed by sounds of cracking ice and falling snow. It had seemingly iridescent eyes—they were a very peculiar color. Depending on the light, they looked white or purple, blue or red.

He—because it did not look like a she—was definitely not part of a tree, but the tree was certainly part of him. That was how large and how much his presence consumed all that was around him.

“What is he?” Agnis asked timidly.

Clay Judah nodded. “He is the one known as the Opal of Ice and Snow.”

The Opal narrowed his eyes and peered down at all of them. With lively laughter, he said in a low voice that resounded through the earth, “Claaay Juuudaaaah, youuu’ve broooought sooome fuuunny-lookiiing onnnes wiiiith youuu.”

When the Opal laughed, his belly shook to the point that snow powder fell around them again. Duan and Agnis, turning whiter and whiter, were completely speechless.

CHAPTER 20



Duan and Agnis stood awestruck. As the Opal looked down at them, he laughed heartily—and every time he laughed, his massive body shook, creating a clatter as the frost and ice from all over his body shattered and scattered.

“Argh!”

“What is it? Giis!”

“Augh!”

As the fragments of frost and ice fell mercilessly on top of their heads, Duan, Agnis, and the baby grinia, Check, huddled together and cowered down.

Clay Judah stood watch over the scene. After the Opal had laughed a while, Clay looked up again at his merry master and greeted him afresh: “Opal, I’m glad you’re well. It’s been a long time.”

The reason why he addressed his master so informally was because the Opal himself had requested it. Clay Judah continued.

“The reason why I’m here today is because I have three requests.”

The Opal raised his snow-cruled eyebrows before opening his strangely colored iridescent eyes wider. “Threeeee, you say? Welllll, that’s awwwfully greedy. Ho ho ho!” And he started to laugh again, causing snow to scatter all around.

Once the Opal had settled again, Clay Judah continued. “Well, three wishes—or rather, one wish each from three people. I have something I’d like to ask you, but let me first introduce these two. Actually, why don’t you introduce yourselves? And then, you can state your wish.”

The Opal narrowed his eyes satisfactorily.

“Agnis, why don’t you start?”

Coaxed by Clay Judah, Agnis stood up, dusting the snow off her whole body as she fearfully approached the Opal. As she walked toward him, she was once again astounded by his great size.

The Opal was sitting down on something that looked like a large chair made of stone. Both his hands fell limply to his sides. He was wearing what looked like a long robe—but because his whole body was covered in ice and snow, it wasn’t exactly clear. On top of that, branches and trunks of trees crowded all around him, entwining in such a way that they looked like they were a part of him.

Agnis somehow managed to walk through the deep snow. When she got close to him, he loomed so large that she couldn’t see his face, only his large chin. Agnis took a deep breath and bravely started to speak. “How do you do? Please forgive us for this sudden intrusion. I’m Agnis R. Link, and I’m a princess from a small kingdom called Fiana. But I am adventuring as a sorcerer at the moment.”



Adventurer
Level
16
Valid until:
22nd December
Sigress Year 383

Name

Clay Judah Anderson

Date of Birth: 22nd December
Sigress Year 358

Residence & Citizenship: 2
Doma Road, Ronza

Contact Address: See above.

Occupation: Sorcerer Warrior

Issue date: 22nd December
Sigress Year 382

Skill Points:

Strength...107	Intelligence...96
Karma...+47	Magic...37

Experience Points: 6420
(Level-up possible at 7300)

Duan Surk
Character File

クレイ・ジュダ・アンダーソン
Clay Judah Anderson

Clay Judah is an adventurer who met Duan, Olba, and Agnis in Orland. At the age of 24, he possesses an astounding amount of experience, catapulting him to a level 16. His swordplay style differs from Olba's, but he is skilled nonetheless, and he also is a sorcerer who can freely use dispel-related magic. He has an elegantly featured face but does not give off the impression of being weak or a pushover. Even though he doesn't talk much, he has a unique charm, and the ability to warm the spirits of those around him. He is never without his sword that he acquired at the Saras Swamps. Under his special black metal armor, he wears a flexible leather, which is the same color as his black hair.



Duan admired Agnis as she started to introduce herself to the great Opal with a determined attitude. *She's a princess of a whole country, after all. You can see the difference at a time like this!*

The Opal appeared to be listening, too, without laughing.

Agnis began explaining her request. "The other day, I received a letter from my friend, Prince Charles of Orland, which requested that I visit him. It was because he had found a strange book, and what he was worried about came true . . . But this story is so complicated that I can't possibly condense it. What should I do?" Agnis turned toward Clay Judah with a troubled face.

"You should talk about that later then," he replied. "Why don't you summarize your wish now?"

Agnis nodded earnestly and focused on the Opal again.

"A battle broke out at the Silver-Gray Castle, where Charles lives. During the fight, I chanted words to unleash my Fire Spell at the enemy. Oh, I use offensive Fire Magic. However, not only did the fire not come out, but I felt no sense of my magical power whatsoever. Usually, the hand with which I hold my rod becomes numb from the vibrations, but that didn't happen. I have no idea what happened, or what I need to do to restore my magic. That's why I've come for your help today."

The Opal tilted his head slightly. The sounds of breaking icicles echoed, and the snow and ice fell to the ground. But he didn't say anything.

Agnis' eyes pleaded with Clay Judah, as though she were silently asking for help. He nodded as if to say, "That's enough."

Agnis retreated, and Clay Judah urged Duan to introduce himself. Duan hurriedly brushed the snow off himself and stood in front of the Opal.



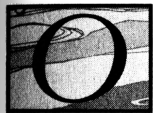
“M—my name is Duan Surk. I’m a fighter, but I’m still a novice, with very low levels. Having recently met Mr. Anderson, I was impressed with his magic. To be honest, I . . . well, no—when I took the examinations for adventuring, the instructors were pushing me to be a sorcerer. I think it was because I have a little magic power. But I wanted to be a fighter no matter what, so I chose to be a fighter as my path. I’m not particularly confident about raising my skills as a fighter, but . . .”

As Duan talked frantically, the Opal stared at him, his strangely colored eyes glistening. Only Clay Judah noticed the change.

The Opal is surprised, he thought. Is this delicate young boy surprising the Opal of Ice and Snow . . . ?

That, in and of itself, shocked Clay Judah. He, himself, had acknowledged Duan’s presence and charm. That was why he’d brought Duan here. He decided that it would be a good experience for Duan to be introduced to the Opal—but he never would have thought the Opal would be this taken aback. Clay Judah recalled a certain emotion.

CHAPTER 21



On a mountain buried in snow and ice dwelled a prophet called the Opal of Ice and Snow, who possessed a powerful magic. He was a statue, but also a golem, who had received life. The great sorcerer who created him had died a long, long time ago. As he sat alone in the frozen land, the Opal looked down at the world, his intelligence having far exceeded the expectations of his maker. Before Duan's and Agnis' arrival, the only human to know of him was Clay Judah.

Clay Judah once met a ryuto during a quest, which led him to find out about the Opal.

The ryuto was called Shirarito, and he was a ranger who could use defensive magic. The ryuto race had green skin and a slightly smaller build than humans. They were wise and agile, but also delicate and easily hurt.

Shirarito had entered deep into a dungeon with his companions. However, because the dungeon was such a high

level, his companions collapsed one after the other; and even though he had used his healing magic, they reached their breaking point. He thought countless times that they should turn back.

If I push any farther, I'll really lose my companions.

But Shirarito couldn't help feeling that the treasure was just a short way away, and he couldn't convince himself to turn back. Even though it was called a treasure, it wasn't gold or gemstones—it was a special item that was said to restore magic power. He needed to get that item.

Shirarito desperately needed the treasure because his respected master, the Opal, wasn't in good health. Nobody knew how many hundreds of years the Opal had lived. Shirarito thought he looked nearly dead already. He was buried under snow and ice, and Shirarito felt strongly that the Opal could transform into the trees and become a part of the mountain at any moment.

A few years prior, Shirarito had committed what amounted to an unforgivable crime in the ryuto race. He'd fallen in love with a human girl from the village, and at her request, they'd entered the Hamlet of Illusions, where only the ryuto were allowed.

The girl went mad from the illusions and the scent of the flowers, and she started to destroy all the flowers and trees that bloomed abundantly throughout the Hamlet. After three days and three nights of dancing around crazily, the girl finally collapsed.

Although the scent only increased vitality in the ryuto race, it turned out to be a powerful stimulant for humans. Shirarito was terrified, and after he delivered the girl back to her village, he returned to the forest. Of course, the members of the girl's household were in a terrible

state. They thought someone had kidnapped or eaten her after she had not returned home for three days and three nights. Although she had finally returned, now she was unconscious.

The other ryuto did not forgive Shirarito, who returned to the forest with his head hanging shamefully.

Shirarito was stricken with grief and wandered around the forest aimlessly. Eventually, he drifted into a forest buried under snow and ice. He lost the will to live and collapsed on the spot, his body temperature rapidly decreasing. He wanted to die like that—as though he were falling asleep. Just as his consciousness was beginning to go cloudy, Shirarito heard a warm voice filled with love.

“Heeello . . . My head is feeeling a liiitttle heeeaaavy. Caan youuu take a look?”

The voice belonged to none other than the Opal of Ice and Snow. After that, Shirarito cared for the Opal and learned many things about life from him. The Opal, in turn, took in all of Shirarito’s worries, wounds, and pains, and gave Shirarito a reason to live.

It was the power of magic. The Opal noticed Shirarito’s potential and made him realize it. Shirarito also overcame the mistake of his past, and studied magic with great fervor to release himself from the thought of his lover.

After many months, he matured into a respectable sorcerer. He had grown so much that he could even recall his past love and his hometown nostalgically. His short golden hair was now so long that it covered his back; he wore it woven into myriad tight braids.

The Opal reminded him, “Youuu should be leeaving onnn a journey soon.”

“On a journey?” asked Shirarito.

The Opal nodded. “Yesss. The wooorld is wiiide. You ooonly knooow ryuuutos. Youuu should know maaany ooother kiiinds of peeeople, tooooo. Go and taaake a journey, and fiiind some cooompanions.”

Shirarito decided to do as the Opal said and left on a journey. He traveled to a faraway continent, where he obtained qualification as an adventurer and started to look for companions.

Just as the Opal had said, the world was expansive, and there were many species of beings—giants, corbolts, goblins, elves, and lizardmen. Even Shirarito, as a ryuto, could blend in without resistance.

After a number of years, he met a number of trustworthy teammates and challenged a number of quests. There were times of success and of disappointments, but either way, he learned the joy that could be shared with his friends.

This was Shirarito’s greatest treasure. When he realized this happiness, he went back to the Forest of Ice and Snow to thank the Opal for showing him that the world was large and for teaching him how to use magic. But what he saw was his master so weakened that he was almost turning into part of the frosty forest around him.

CHAPTER 22



lay Judah challenged this quest five years ago. It was a dungeon with such a high level that it was considered to be impossible to complete alone. But he already was a level 12 and wanted to test his luck and skills, and thus entered the dungeon.

Of course, along the way, he encountered many situations that made him think it would be best to turn back. However, each time, he was able to overcome the situation and defeat the monsters.

Clay Judah realized there was somebody else ahead of him in the dungeon. It was because he noticed a trap that had already been set off. It also seemed that there was one human—or another species or monster—that was wounded, considering that he spotted a few fresh blood dots as he continued deeper into the dungeon. Judging from the tracks, he deduced that there were several of them.

He followed the trail of blood. After a while, the inside of the dungeon started to get noisy, although it was quiet barely a

moment before. He heard some people speaking, monsters groaning, something breaking, and also something banging into something.

Carrying a torchlight, Clay Judah ran through the complex, narrow pathways in the dungeon toward the noise, until he happened upon a spacious clearing with a high ceiling and a small river running at the back. Some light poked through from the top, and although it was dark, you could see across the room.

Clay Judah could tell at once that the four people in view were adventurers. They were in two groups on either side of the river—two in front of the river and two on the other bank. However, only one of them was standing. The other three were injured and were slumped down. There were monsters collapsed here and there, too; the undersides of their bodies were covered in peculiar blue scales, and they had horns on their shoulders and at the end of their tails that looked like the tips of knives. One thing that especially drew his attention was their long noses and yellow eyes. Clay Judah had never seen these monsters before.

Noticing that the man who was still standing on the other side of the river was totally confused, he asked from afar, “Hey, are you okay?” The man, who wasn’t expecting someone to call out to him, looked back in surprise, his body trembling.

The man had a green face and many golden braids. Clay Judah could instantly tell he was a different race. He was equipped with beige leather armor and a deep green short cape, and he held a bow in his hands. It was the ryuto, Shirarito.

The adventurers had been surrounded by monsters just one step away from the treasure. They fought desperately, and had just about managed to kill them all, but they’d suffered



great injuries themselves. Even if they chose to give up on the quest, they were now in a position where they didn't have enough strength to go back.

Clay Judah ran toward Shirarito, clicking his heels.

"What happened? Are your companions dead?"

But Shirarito could only stare back at Clay Judah in disbelief, shaking his head from side to side.

Clay Judah went to check on the other adventurers. They were definitely still alive—they were breathing and each had a pulse. However, the rates of their pulses were weakening.

"We need to treat them," insisted Clay Judah.

That's when Shirarito's eyes suddenly welled up with tears. "I—it's my fault. It's because I forced them to come here. They objected because all our levels were so different."

"It's best to retreat, but carrying them would be difficult in their condition," continued Clay Judah.

Shirarito, rubbing his trembling hands together, said, "If only . . . if only I could restore some of my magic power. Then, I would be able to heal them."

Clay Judah examined Shirarito. "You can cast Heal Magic?"

"Y-yes, I can. But because I've used it so many times, it's the end of the show. There's nothing we can do. It's the end."

Shirarito held his head in his hands.

Clay Judah looked alternately at Shirarito and his collapsed companions. "You know about the treasure that is hidden deep in this dungeon, don't you?"

Shirarito nodded, his face downcast.

"It's a magic ring, and it's rumored to be a powerful one. Apparently, if you wear it, your magic power regenerates. Wait here. I'll go get it now. If your magic power is restored, you'll be able to help your friends, right?"

Shirarito looked up at Clay Judah, confused, but Clay Judah already had jumped over the river and was running deeper into the dungeon alone.

Clay Judah encountered the same monster he had seen collapsed on the ground earlier. Also, the last door had a particularly sneaky poison needle trap set to it. But he managed to overcome everything and get hold of the magic ring, regardless.

The ring was platinum, with a shallow golden feather relief on it. There actually were a few rings, but the maker of the dungeon's magic dictated that only one could be taken. To get another, you had to exit the dungeon once, after which everything would be reset; all the traps would then be set again, and all the monsters would be ready and waiting for you. The dungeon itself was an extremely tricky quest.

Clay Judah grabbed the small crystal box that held the ring, pushed it casually into his backpack, and hurried back to where Shirarito was waiting. When he got there, Shirarito was slumped down with the others and looked as though he wasn't breathing.

"Hey!"

Clay Judah lifted his upper body and started to resuscitate him.

Shirarito opened his eyes slightly, and looking as though he had seen something incredible, opened his eyes wide to stare at Clay Judah.

"Here you go." Clay Judah took out the crystal box from his backpack and handed it to Shirarito.

"Try it on. I think your magic power will regenerate."

Shirarito gazed at the crystal box for a while. He could see the ring through the transparent box, but he wouldn't try it on.

“What’s wrong?” asked Clay Judah.

Shirarito shook his head. “I—if I put this ring on, will it not lose its potency? That would be troubling. What would be the point of coming all the way here, when I came to save my mentor?” He stared at Clay Judah quizzically.

“I’m sorry, but can I ask something of you? I’ll give you everything I own. Please, give me this ring, and afterward, would you take it to my mentor? I feel bad about my companions . . . but it’s the only way. I’m not exaggerating. Please, grant me this wish of a lifetime.”

Clay Judah smiled. “Don’t worry—this ring isn’t so weak that it’ll break after one use. You’ll be able to use it many times.”

Shirarito was suddenly overcome with joy.

CHAPTER 23



Shirarito, whose magic power was restored, healed his companions' wounds and returned them to full strength.

He addressed Clay Judah reluctantly, "Like I said earlier, I need this ring to rescue my mentor to whom I'm indebted. He's a great prophet and possesses vast magic power. I must have it. I'll give you all the money I have. Could you give it to me?"

Clay Judah shrugged and said, "Not to worry—that's what I was planning to do in the first place, but on one condition . . ."

"What is it? If there's something I can do, I'll do it."

"Can you take me to this mentor of yours—the great prophet who possess vast magic power?"

Of course, Shirarito consented. He was slightly hesitant about taking a human to that forest, but he felt that the man in front of him wouldn't be a problem. In fact, he was grateful for his presence. He'd entered this dungeon alone and was skilled enough to retrieve the treasure with ease, so there couldn't be

a more reliable partner with whom to journey. Shirarito's own companions had recovered enough to walk, but they still required time to convalesce.

Clay Judah soon met the Opal, who had become emaciated. The Opal partly looked like he was sleeping and partly as though he had already turned into a statue. When Shirarito ran to his side weeping, calling out his name, the Opal opened his iridescent eyes slowly. He scanned Shirarito, simultaneously noticing Clay Judah's presence.

"Shirarito, I aaam in nooo mooood to eeenteeertaaain," he said. It wasn't his usual thick, resonant voice but a weak, hoarse one.

Shirarito replied hastily, "Oh no! My dearest Opal, I have brought a magic ring for you, to restore your magic power. This is Clay Judah—he helped me."

The Opal moved his eyes dramatically and narrowed them at Shirarito, who thrust forth the magic ring and presented it to him.

"Liiimdaaa's haaandmaaade maaagic riing," said the Opal as he opened his extremely large hand.

Limda was the name of the one who'd made the dungeon. Shirarito was surprised that the Opal knew him, but he quickly thought of something else and drew his breath. How was this delicate ring going to fit on the Opal's thick finger? He was about to mention it, but before he could, the crystal box that contained the ring started to float in the air.

The lid opened without making a sound, after which the ring floated up and stopped mid-air. It sparkled in the sunlight that was reflected off the white snow. Shirarito and Clay Judah didn't move or say a word; they simply watched what was happening in amazement.

The ring gravitated toward the Opal's hand—and, quite extraordinarily, it fit exactly onto his finger, as though it had been made to order.

Unexpectedly, the forest began to change—no, the ground. The entire forest seemed as though it were trembling. Shirarito and Clay Judah looked around, wondering whether it was an earthquake, but they soon realized it was not. An aura of light radiated from the Opal's entire body. The white forest was shaking for him—this was how he managed to regenerate.

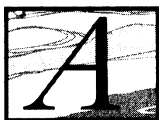
The Opal laughed and said, “Ha ha ha! This'll giive mee anooother thouuusand yeeears.”

Whether or not this was true, neither Shirarito nor Clay Judah would ever be able to ascertain. But witnessing the Opal laughing healthily made something warm up deep inside their chests. The two exchanged glances and started to laugh.

After the Opal's regeneration, Shirarito returned to his companions, but Clay Judah chose to live a while with the Opal. The Opal graciously taught him his own magic techniques and also brought out Clay Judah's own potential. Shirarito had learned defense magic from the Opal, but Clay Judah was taught a completely different type of magic. It was magic that utilized one's opponent's magic power—for example, it could seal one's enemy's magic or destroy it.

Shirarito didn't know this, but the Opal's true strength lay in what he had bestowed to Clay Judah. If you were as skilled as the Opal, any kind of magic could be easily handled, but the Opal's expertise was in dispel-type magic. He was originally created as a living statue with that purpose, but there was no one left who would know that now—not even the Opal himself remembered clearly.

CHAPTER 24



argh!”

Duan was about to tumble down, but quickly clung onto Agnis’ hip.

“Stop! Pervert. What are you doing?” Without a moment’s pause, Agnis boldly smacked away his hand.

“Oh no . . . !” Duan fell down, head over heels, onto the slippery surface of the ice.

“Danger, danger! Be careful, Duan!”

Duan threw some snow at Check, who was making a fuss that Duan had fallen.

“Shoot . . .” *How many times have I fallen?* Duan, covered in snow, looked up at the Opal.

They began to remove all the ice and snow that was encrusted onto the Opal’s body by scraping it off and polishing it with a cloth.

The Opal had listened to their requests once through and then asked them to do this work. At first, Duan naively thought

that it wouldn't be too much trouble. After all, although she was a girl, Agnis would be working, too. He didn't think it would take a whole day. But no, the ice and snow were incredibly hard. And because they weren't supposed to harm the Opal's body, they couldn't crack away at it with a snow shovel.

There was a small hut to the side of the Opal, and inside there were things like snow shovels, a fireplace, and a small stove. Shirarito had lived there a long time ago, and afterward, Clay Judah had spent some time in the hut, as well, but Duan and Agnis didn't know this.

Clay Judah lay sprawled in the hut with his eyes closed. Duan and Agnis hoped that he would help them out. However, they were disappointed to learn that they were wrong, even thinking at times that he was a rather cold guy.

But in the end, they figured that maybe their wish would be granted once they completed the task of polishing the Opal. Maybe this was a ritual or some kind of test—a test to see whether they were worthy of having their wishes granted. It wasn't clear, where the Opal's body ended, however, so they continued to clean, even as the sun began to set.

Duan and Agnis were so soaked in sweat that it dripped from their hair. Taking shallow, uneven breaths, they carefully observed the Opal. He wasn't saying anything and had his eyes closed. Suddenly, a cold northern wind gusted, freezing them to the bone.

"Urgh! It's c-cold!" proclaimed Agnis. She quivered and firmly held her arms with her slender hands. It was, indeed, cold. Of course, it would be when a cold breeze blew against one's sweaty body.

"Agnis, we'll catch a cold like this. Why don't we call it a day and go to the hut? We should get changed," Duan said.

"Y-yes . . ." Agnis nodded, her teeth chattering.

Duan opened his cape wide and held her inside. Together, they hobbled to the hut—but when they opened the hut's door, they both gulped.

"Hey, well done." Clay Judah, who was at the back of the hut, smiled; and K'nock, who was beside him, sat up lazily.

When they retreated inside, the warm and cozy air enveloped them. Who knows when Clay Judah had collected it, but there was a neat pile of firewood in the corner of the hut; the stove and fireplace were ablaze with red fire. There also was an iron pot on top of the stove, and something bubbling away inside that smelled very good. The area around the hut had been cleared of snow.

Both Agnis and Duan collapsed on the spot, feeling utterly embarrassed about their momentary bitterness toward Clay Judah.

CHAPTER 25



Although the place was buried under snow and ice, there was a forest where animals lived, and a running river full of fish a small distance away.

They all lived together quietly, and in the middle of it all was the Opal. Outside the range of the Opal's eyes, monsters such as snow geniroes wandered about. But it was absolutely peaceful where Duan and the others were.

Initially, K'nock was helping Duan and Agnis outside, but he unexpectedly disappeared midway. They finally found out the reason why: He had been helping collect firewood and had also gone to collect fish, as well as nuts and berries from trees. He was especially well adapted to this kind of terrain and climate. Even though he may not have experienced it firsthand previously, perhaps his instincts told him where the berries were, where the river ran, and where the fish were hiding. Thanks to K'nock, Agnis and Duan drank soup that warmed them from the inside and ate freshly grilled fish.

Chomp, chomp. “This is d-delicious . . .” Duan thoroughly chewed bite after bite.

“Very—I feel totally revived,” Agnis said sincerely as she drank her soup.

Check found himself grappling with a fish that was larger than he was.

“By the way, what kind of person is the Opal? I mean, what is he? He’s not human, is he?” inquired Duan.

Clay Judah gave Duan a summarized answer. Upon hearing his explanation, Duan reflected upon and appreciated the magnificent story behind the land, causing his heart to beat intensely.

Agnis’ heart also beat faster, but for a different reason. It was because she felt as though she had taken a glimpse of Clay Judah as a teen—only three years’ difference from her age now.

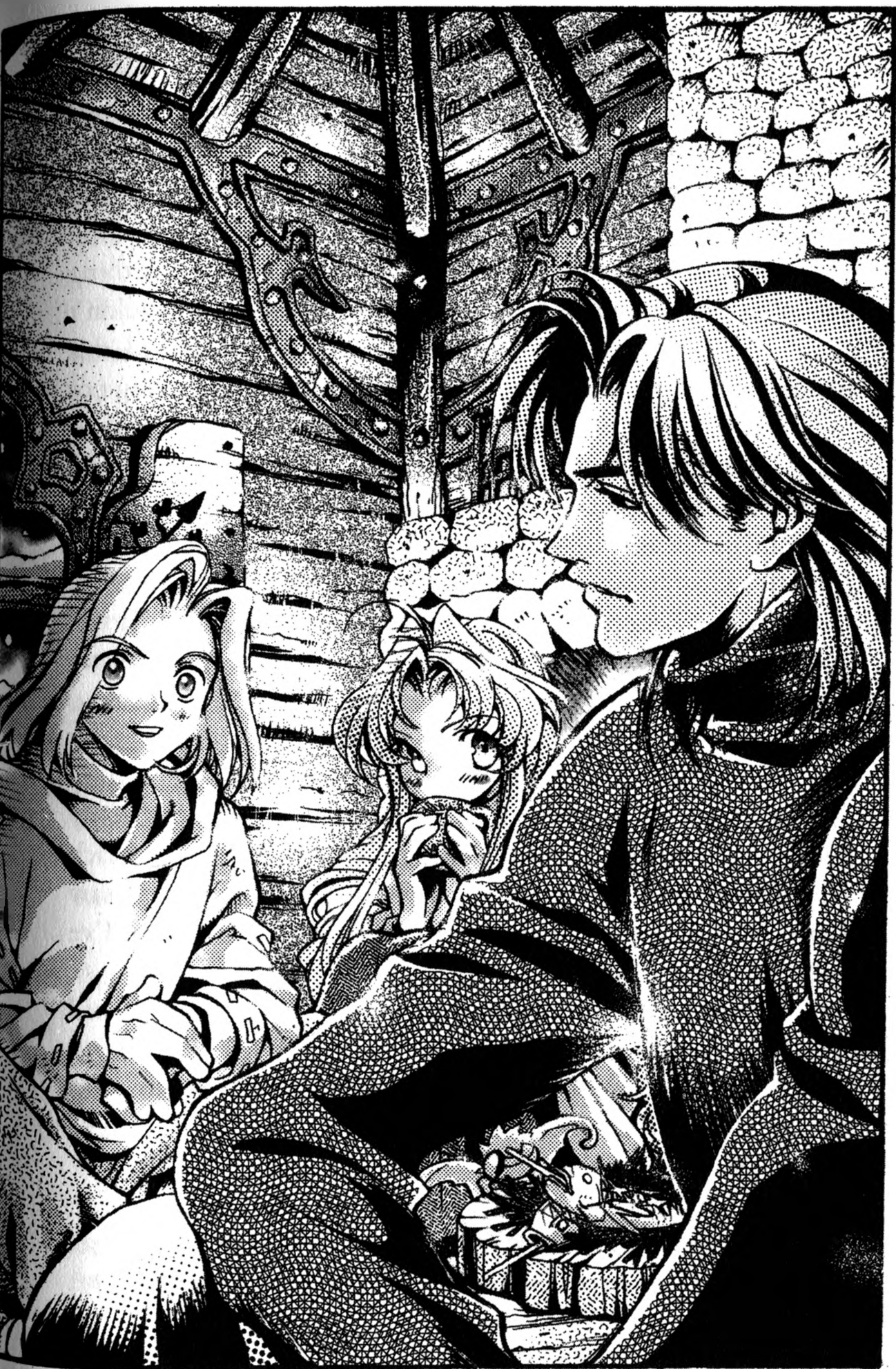
Of course, he still was young. Although he had noble features, his countenance radiated a strangely sweet and likable charm.

As Agnis gazed longingly at Clay Judah’s profile, he took notice and gaped at her with uncertainty in his eyes. Agnis’ cheeks immediately burned up. Clay Judah continued to stare at Agnis, but eventually stood and said, “I’m sure you’re tired, but it’s probably best to take care of your own horses.” And with that he left the hut.

Agnis let go of all her nervousness at once and sighed deeply. Duan shrugged as he watched her hang her head and press her hand onto her heaving chest.

She thinks I don’t know how she feels. That’s why I’m pretending not to notice. But I can see it. It’s clear as day. It’s so obvious, really.

Duan felt conflicted watching Agnis act this way—at times suffering, and at other times, happily gawking at Clay Judah. As



her friend, he wanted Agnis to be happy. But knowing who the object of her affection was, Duan could predict that Agnis had no real chance.

That's why, however much he could understand and empathize with her, Duan envisioned a brokenhearted scene would ultimately result. It was also something else—something far more complicated. Duan felt another emotion he couldn't really understand. It was probably because he never had this much contact with a girl his age; he felt there was something not at all fun about it. That was Duan's way of breaking it down.

"I'm going to go check on Jocca." Agnis quickly readied herself and stood up.

"Oh, me too . . ." began Duan, but Agnis already had run out after Clay Judah.

"Man, you could at least help with the cleaning up first," complained Duan, although he ended up clearing Agnis' plates anyway.



The horses were tied under a large tree next to the hut. Clay Judah was standing next to Air, brushing his sparkling black hair. Beside him, Agnis looked after Jocca. When Judith saw Duan, she grunted, her face seeming to say, "Hurry up! I've been waiting."

"You should have eaten your meals more leisurely," said Clay Judah, offering to share the berries in his hands with Duan. "Feed these to your horses. They're nutritious, and they're also their favorites. Here Agnis, you too."

"Oh, thank you."

"Thank you."

Agnis and Duan fed their respective horses. Agnis' horse, Jocca, ate contentedly and nuzzled her snout into Agnis. But

Duan's horse, the troublesome Judith, ate the whole bunch in one go, and started to bite Duan's clothes as though she were asking for more.

"S-stop it. Um, I'm really sorry, but do you have any more?"

Clay Judah shook his head.

"There's more, but if you feed them too much in one sitting, the result is poisonous."

Duan spoke to Judith, who was still tugging at his clothes.

"See, Clay Judah says 'no.' Tomorrow, tomorrow. Here, have some hay instead. Everyone else is eating it."

Duan brought out the hay that had been prepared, but Judith would not even look at it.

"Why? Why are you the only one like this?"

Duan sighed and stared disapprovingly at Judith. But only a moment later, he noticed for the first time that the sky was clear. It was a brilliantly starry night. White stars, red stars, blue stars—large stars, small stars, and stars that looked like mist. All the stars seemed to twinkle.

The night sky was so beautiful that Duan, who should have been used to seeing a starry sky, was at a loss for words.

"What are you doing? Why are you looking up?" asked Agnis.

Duan replied, still looking upward, "The sky . . . it's amazing."

"The sky?" She gazed up above, as well, and noticed that it was, in fact, one of those rare nights when the star-filled sky was absolutely magnificent.

K'nock, who sat beside Agnis, was awed by the sky, too, as was Clay Judah, who observed the sight as he fed Air hay. They were all speechless, entranced by the starry sky.

CHAPTER 26



Duan and the others felt completely revitalized after seeing such a magnificent starry sky, and they fell asleep happily—everyone except Check, that is.

He was still battling with the fish while everyone was looking after their horses. But he was asleep now, all the same.

They were exhausted after the journey and hard work, and as soon as they closed their eyes, they fell into the deep abyss of sleep.

In the morning, the only one who noticed that Clay Judah was gone was K'nock. But K'nock could only lift his head to check. Failing to kindle any interest, he rested his chin on top of his paws. Duan, Agnis, and Check were next to him, fast asleep. Check, in particular, slept face up and snored heavily and noisily, which was odd, considering his size.

Duan was the first to awake. It took him some time to remember exactly where he was and what he was doing there. Once his head started to function and he remembered that he was

here with the Opal of Ice and Snow, he started to find things really funny.

It's always the same these days. I'm living a lifestyle where I have no idea to what kind of situation I'll wake up. Sometimes it'll be in the forest, other times it'll be in a bed in a port city inn. There were times when it was a bed in a cabin on a ship, and recently there was that time in the jail cell. On the other hand, there was the time when I woke up in a guestroom of a grand castle. You never know. I guess that's what being an adventurer is all about, pondered Duan.

But Agnis' adaptability is truly surprising. She's a princess, but she can sleep anywhere. Seeing her sleeping face looking so defenseless really brings out her elegance and nobility—and her beauty. Actually, she simply looks really cute!

Duan was gazing thoughtfully at Agnis' face when her eyes opened suddenly, perhaps because she'd become aware of Duan. Duan was taken aback and, in a fluster, pretended to fold blankets.

But Duan wasn't on Agnis' radar at all—she quickly scanned the room and asked, “Where is he? Where's Clay Judah?”

“What? O-oh, yeah. He's not around,” answered Duan indifferently.

“I'm going to have a look,” she replied, and then she left the hut, K'nock following her.

“Fine, whatever . . .” lamented Duan.

Poor Duan—it was no fun for him. He neatened his ruffled hair, and then he stretched his arms two or three times, but he worried about Agnis, and decided to go outside, too.

Of course, the one animal left in the room was oblivious to it all and was still in a deep sleep.

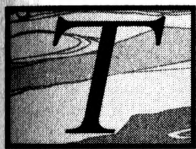
Agnis and Duan soon found out where Clay Judah was—talking to the Opal. However, when Clay Judah and the Opal

saw the pair, they stopped talking. It was clear that they were talking about something important, but due to the tension in the air, Duan and Agnis were reluctant to ask what it was about. Duan remembered that Clay Judah had said that he wanted to ask his master something.

“What’s happened? Why are you standing here so pensively? It’s a bit late, but let’s have breakfast,” said Clay Judah.

With that, Agnis and Duan returned to their senses.

CHAPTER 27



he work of scraping off the ice and snow from the Opal restarted, and it ended up lasting for a week. It was far more complicated than Agnis and Duan had imagined. What was particularly frustrating was that however much they scraped off, more ice and snow settled on top.

On the third day, Agnis began to complain.

“Oh! We’re never going to make any progress. If I could use my Fire Magic, I would melt it all in one go!”

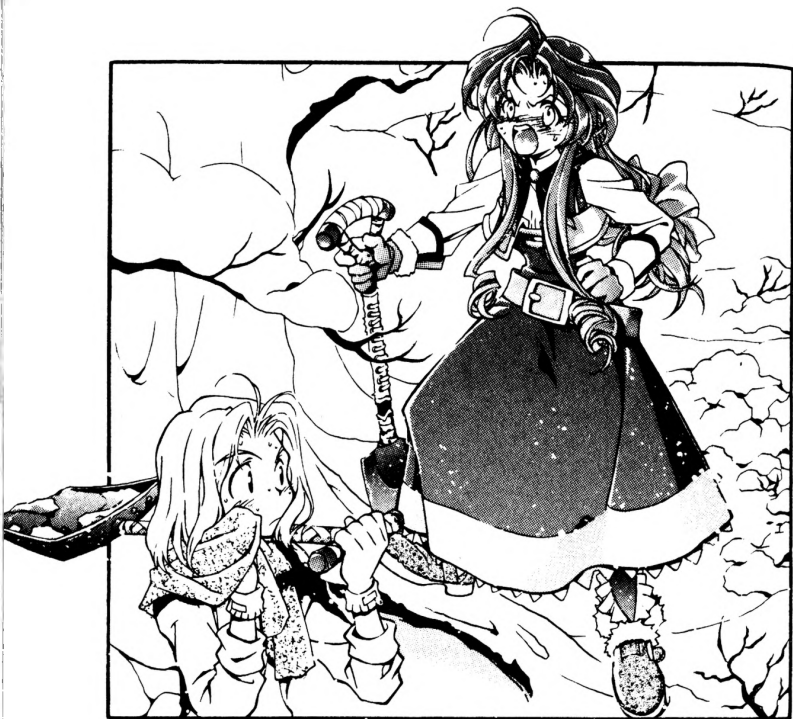
Yeah, fire would melt not only the Opal, but all the ice in the area—but I don’t think that’s the point . . . Duan tilted his head, which made Agnis more annoyed.

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not serious. Even if I *could* use it, I wouldn’t!”

“Yeah. Of course not . . .” Duan emitted a weak laugh.

Agnis snapped at him further. “You’re so rude. You simply don’t understand the woman’s heart—not one bit!”

“What?” Duan’s mouth fell open.



It's like walking through a minefield. Hmph. No matter how frustrated you feel, you shouldn't always take it out on me.

Duan let out a deep sigh while readjusting the shovel in his hands, and he decided to ignore Agnis. The Opal slept through the struggle. When he wasn't asleep, he hummed a melody that Agnis and Duan felt as though they'd heard before. Either way, listening to it made them sleepy.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, they took a break from working. When they returned to the hut to eat dinner, Agnis shouted to Duan, who was walking next to her, "Oh please, can you stop that guy's humming?"

"There's nothing we can do. What could we possibly do? 'Um, excuse me, Mr. Opal but that humming . . . it's really annoying, so could you please stop it?' No way. Why don't *you* ask him?"

Agnis gaped back at him, wide-eyed. "There's no way I could do that!"

"I couldn't either."

"I guess not, but I can't get the humming out of my head. And when I hear it, it makes me feel really sleepy—I'm almost falling over!"

"Yeah, me too."

The two grumbled about this and that as they returned to the hut. When they got there, Clay Judah, who was preparing their dinner, as usual, welcomed them with a smile.

Agnis decided to go for it and ask Clay Judah. "Um, Mr. Opal's song—do you know what it is?"

Clay Judah cocked his head and replied, "I don't know."

Both Duan and Agnis were exhausted and immediately plopped down their wrecked bodies.

CHAPTER 28



Agnis and Duan both suffered blisters and calluses on their hands that twice had burst and bled. Each time, Check had healed them and restored some of their strength, but Check's healing skills were not enough to cure complete exhaustion. At first, they had ample strength to chat and joke, but after the seventh day, they didn't even have strength to do that anymore.

Duan tried to wake Agnis for another day of work. Her eyes remained closed at first, but she suddenly stood and began yelling.

"I can't do this any more!"

"What?"

Agnis frowned and, with tears brimming in her purple eyes, dashed out. K'nock quickly followed after her. Duan was about to follow her, too, but Clay Judah stopped him.

"The master is calling you."

"B-b-but Agnis is . . ." Duan attempted to explain.

He told Clay Judah that she ran out, to which Clay Judah nodded and replied, "Okay. I'll go after her. You'd better go quickly to the master."

Duan was worried, but he understood that Clay Judah's response meant that Duan had no choice but to go to the Opal. He knew that with both Clay Judah and K'nock following Agnis, she would be all right.

Check entered, flapping. "What happened? Agnis went somewhere?"

Duan replied in a whisper, "No, I don't think it's a big deal. But anyway, something's come up. Mr. Opal is calling me. Maybe he'll teach me magic!"

Saying it out loud made Duan's heart beat faster.

Oh, yeah! Magic. It's magic! Will I finally be able to use magic, too? Magic that will burn up or freeze my opponents? Offensive magic that'll destroy things? Or magic that'll cure my companions and heal their wounds? Or I hear there's a kind of dispel magic that can reflect an opponent's magic. Or magic that can control my enemies, throw things into the air, or possibly make me fly?

Duan's imagination ran amuck. After he took one deep breath, he dashed toward the Opal's location. Check, flapping his wings, followed behind him.

The fresh snow, which had fallen the night before, covered the ground. It was as smooth and beautiful as pure white silk cloth.

CHAPTER 29



Thanks to Agnis' and Duan's hard work, the Opal was beginning to look rather sharp, the contours of his entire body now visible. He sat on a large chair that looked like an equally large rock, but it was because his body and hair were also made out of white marble. Only his iridescent eyes sparkled.

Turning his eyes toward Duan, the Opal said, "Thaaank youuu vceery muuuch. My boody feels sooo muuuch liiighter noooow. It haaasn't feeelllt this waaay for a looong tiime."

"Y-you're welcome . . . but because snow fell yesterday, you have snow on your head and back again," replied Duan.

The Opal started laughing: "Ho ho ho." As usual, his whole body shook as he laughed.

All the snow that had settled on him scattered around, turning everything in the vicinity white. When the snow settled and the field of vision cleared, the Opal said, "Yooou wiiilll eeventuaallly haaave pooower."

“Power?” asked Duan.

The Opal nodded. “Hooowever, it isn’t only that youuu’ll increeease strength. Youuu will have to carry pooower that no siiingle huuuman can caaarry. When thaaat tiime cooomes, cooome and see meee agaaain.”

“What?” Duan was confused.

The Opal continued, “Aaallriiight? Dooooon’t forget. Dooo nooot geeet crushed by thaaat abiility. Alsooo, do not get teeempted by baaad ones. With seeelf-cooonceit comes deestruction.”

“With self-conceit comes destruction?” No way. Me? This clump of complexes that’s so easily depressed? Me? Other things, maybe, but not that . . .

Duan thought that it couldn’t possibly happen to him. However, he didn’t yet realize that his pondering that very point was connected to self-conceit.

So, the Opal isn’t going to teach me any magic, after all?

Duan was troubled, but the Opal wouldn’t say anything more. Duan was disappointed.

And anyway, what does “You will have to carry power that no single human can carry alone” mean? If it isn’t physical strength, then is it magic power? When will I find out? Is there nothing I can do now to prepare? Like some kind of training . . . ?

There were a million things Duan wanted to ask, but it wasn’t the sort of atmosphere in which he felt he could ask questions casually. The Opal, not noticing how Duan felt, said, “Theeen, teeelll that giiirl sooorcerer tooo cooome tooo meee.

So, that was it . . . ?

Duan couldn’t keep his shoulders from drooping. Sighing all the while, he decided to call Agnis.

“Hey, Duan. Did you understand what he was saying?” asked Check, who followed Duan, flapping his wings.

“No, I didn’t understand, and still don’t,” he answered.

Check, with a self-important air, replied, “I didn’t think so. If I didn’t understand it, how could you, Duan? Giis!”

“Hey! Cheeky!”

Duan pretended to hit Check, but Duan was so caught off guard that he thought his heart was going to jump out of his chest. Check, who until a moment ago was his usual green color, was now white as snow. His fur and tail were still golden, and his eyes were still black, but he looked as though he were a completely different person—or rather, a completely different grinia.

“Ch-Check . . . What happened to your body?”

Check screwed up his face at Duan’s reaction.

“Look at your body,” instructed Duan.

Check turned around and looked at his stomach and back, and then he started to open and shut his mouth. All of a sudden, he fainted—and because he was in mid-flight, he plummeted toward the ground. Duan quickly caught him with both hands before Check landed.

“When you’re this white, I can hardly tell you apart from the snow,” Duan whispered. Then, he suddenly realized something. *Maybe it’s winter camouflage! In the winter, some birds and animals that live in the snow change the color of their fur or feathers. He’s been in this winter wonderland for a week. And this is his first time.*

Duan was strangely impressed when he realized that griniás had this ability. At the same time, he thought that maybe he also had some hidden talent and courage that was beginning to bubble up inside of him.

As a child, Duan was sickly with no parents, so his brother, Gaeley, used to look after him. He had grown up admiring his brother’s strength; although thinking about it now, his brother

had been an only a child himself. He would have wanted to rely on somebody, too. But Gaeley never made a single complaint. In the winter, there were no well paying jobs, and on top of that, Duan's medicine cost money. They had been in an extremely dire situation. Gaeley had settled for eating hard fruit. Duan, who had nightmares in his high fever, had taken note of his brother's sacrifice throughout his childhood. Gaeley's strong will and aspirations made a powerful impact on Duan's future.

Duan also was an important person to someone—someone who wouldn't be alive without him. That someone was Check.

The discovery that Check had a previously unknown ability was an event that would bear an unusual amount of weight for Duan.

CHAPTER 30



Meanwhile, Agnis, secretly expecting Duan to follow after her, had taken a melodramatic pose in the snow—kneeling and covering her face with both her hands. But there was no indication that he was coming—no pat on her shoulder or voice calling out to her. She could tell that K'nock was next to her, but where was Duan?

Tsk! Why doesn't Duan understand the woman's heart? When a girl runs off, you always have to run after her and cheer her up.

"Right, K'nock?" As soon as she placed her hand on his head, K'nock reacted to something.

"Hmm? What is it?" When Agnis turned around, she saw none other than Clay Judah. The blood rushed to her cheeks, reddening them. She immediately stood up and remained there, looking awkward.

Clay Judah slowly approached her and said, "Duan was summoned by the Opal."

Where they stood was an ideal lookout spot without an overabundance of trees. From there, they could see the hut where they slept and also down to the foot of the mountain, where the snow was patchy. The white and black were mixed, but as the altitude increased, the white did also.

After witnessing such an amazing sight and the splendid mountain range behind her, Agnis turned stonelike.

"I really don't know what he wants to talk about, but I think he wants to talk to you, too," said Clay Judah, standing beside her, stroking K'nock's snout with his index finger. K'nock narrowed his eyes in pleasure.

"I-I think . . . I'm a failure," wailed Agnis. "I followed Duan here by my own will, but I complain too easily, and I always take my frustrations out on him. Like, I can't stand the Opal's humming or the blisters on my hands . . . There's no way that he'd teach a girl who has no patience or will power or anything!" That was the reason she felt as though she were a failure. She really believed it.

In contrast, Duan, who seems weak, silently gets on with his work. She found this really humbling.

"Failure? But what could you have failed at?" asked Clay Judah, his clear eyes focused directly on her.

Agnis first tried to avoid his gaze, but then faced him again. "I don't think I'm worthy enough to receive the teachings of the Opal."

Recently, the way she spoke had completely returned to normal. She now spoke using more formal speech when conversing with Clay Judah—it was more fitting for her. Clay Judah paused a moment and said, "I don't think worthiness has anything to do with receiving someone's teachings. I think it's necessary."

"Necessary?"

“Yeah. I don’t think there’s a reason for it—because the Opal was asked to or because he wanted to. Instead, I think he has an ability to decide what needs to be said to that particular person. That’s how it’s necessary. If that wasn’t the case, regardless of how much you asked, the Opal wouldn’t answer you.”

“What did you ask him?” she inquired, but Clay Judah remained silent.

Flustered, Agnis continued, “Oh, I’m sorry. Never mind. How impolite and nosy of me. Please, really, don’t answer!”

But Clay Judah shook his head in disagreement. “I don’t think you’re being nosy. It’s just that it’s a complicated story, so I was thinking about how to tell you. And I don’t have a great understanding of it yet, either. To put it simply, it’s about this sword I carry.”

Clay Judah patted the thin longsword’s sheath. He was never without his sword. Agnis knew that he always kept it near him.

“This sword is called the Sword of Shido, but apparently, the Opal knew the person who made it. I recently found out that Shido was the maker’s name.”

Agnis was so nervous that her knees turned jellylike, simply because she was standing next to Clay Judah. She mustered all her will to stop her body from trembling while she listened to his story.

Clay Judah misunderstood her body’s tremors and asked, “Are you cold? Of course you are. You really get the wind here. It would be silly to continue standing here to chat. And Duan should be returning soon. Shall we go back?” He put his hand on her shoulder.

Clay Judah’s slightest touch made Agnis feel as though she could fly, but at the same time, it made her feel like crying. *What’s with these intense highs and lows?*

Since realizing that she was in love with Clay Judah, she often worried about her extreme range of feelings. Sometimes, she was so happy that she felt as though she could rise to the heavens—but thinking about their inevitable farewell caused her to sink to a horrible low.

Maybe I should confess my love for him . . . Then, perhaps, I'd be released from the torment of uncertainty. Yeah. I have nothing to lose. It's better to give it your best shot and lose.

Agnis finally had made up her mind and was about to speak when Duan approached them at full speed.

“Hey! Oh my gosh—look! Look at Check!” Duan cried as he thrust out both his hands.

Check lay in the palm of his hands, unconscious and all white.

Agnis gulped. She rushed over and asked, “What happened? Check, he hasn't died, has he?”

Duan shook his head. “No way! No, no. He only fainted because he's been in the snow for so long that his body has turned white. When he realized that he was all white, he fainted.”

“Really? Wow! Has this happened before?”

“No, this is the first time. That's why I was so surprised. Oh yeah, Agnis, the Opal is calling for you. He wants to speak to you now.”

Without hesitation, Agnis swung toward Clay Judah.

He nodded, still smiling. “Go on. We'll wait for you at the hut.”

Agnis, along with K'nock, walked to the Opal. As she traveled, she wondered what the Opal told Duan.

Was Duan taught some magic? Argh. But anyway . . . Is there anything I can do to stop my heart from beating so hard this instant?

Surprisingly, the words the Opal delivered to Agnis were few—just one sentence: “Aaagnis, you knooow beeeest whooo to aaask foor the aaansweeer youuu seeek.”

That was it. Afterward, he thanked Agnis for making his body clean in the same manner he did when speaking to Duan.

What a letdown, thought Agnis. We worked so hard to make the Opal's body clean. And that was it?

She was disappointed, but felt as though she could have predicted his answer.

Perhaps the Opal knew why she really came all the way here.

“Who to ask for the answer you seek”? It was most likely Agnis' mother, Rubis. What was the point of coming here before I went to see her? Well, Clay Judah once said that the Opal only says things that the recipient needs to hear. So, maybe he decided that there would be no point in giving more advice than that.

Agnis paused on her way back to the hut to take several deep breaths. *I can't carry on like this. It isn't like me. Anyway, it's pathetic of me to think about Clay Judah nonstop, a hundred more times—no, a thousand more times than I think about why I'm not able to use my magic, when that is so much more important. Right, I've decided!*

She pursed her lips and stared off into the direction of the hut. Then, she hoisted her skirt and marched through the path of dense snow. K'nock followed nimbly after Agnis, who had, in fact, made up her mind to confess her love for Clay Judah. But K'nock was barely visible in the white snow.

CHAPTER 31



gnis . . . ?”

Agnis’ expression was so startlingly determined when she entered the hut that Duan dropped the log he was picking up.

Without looking at Duan, she addressed Clay Judah. “I’d like to talk to you for a moment, please.”

Clay Judah couldn’t help but notice that Agnis looked radiant. But there was an unbearable silence. The tension in the hut rose instantly—it was so high that it felt like you couldn’t blink freely.

Duan bustled about alone amid the uncomfortable atmosphere. He could tell that Check was about to shout in a loud voice, “What’s happening, giis?” so he shoved him into his pocket. Check had only woken up a moment prior and was back to his normal self. In fact, he was better than normal.

With an awkward abruptness, Duan stood erect and announced, “U-um, I’ll go check on the horses!”

He brushed past Agnis and left the hut. Once outside, he breathed deeply. The cold air felt nice against his throat and flushed cheeks.

Why am I the one who's getting excited? Duan wondered. *My face is red and my heart is racing.*

Duan took another deep breath and then, scratching his head, trudged along toward the horses.

Inside the hut, Agnis remained standing, gazing into Clay Judah's eyes. She stared so intensely that she could almost feel it burn. She felt as though if she looked away, all the courage she used to get here would vanish out the window. Clay Judah, on the other hand, seemed perplexed and eventually motioned as if to ask her what was the matter.

Agnis finally breathed, which she realized she hadn't done since she entered the hut. She thought maybe her heart had stopped beating all together. She swallowed her spit once and opened her mouth.

"I . . . I . . . I . . ."

But that was all she managed to get out. She could say nothing else. She could open and close her mouth and breathe, but that was all. It was as though something large was lodged in her throat.

Agnis grabbed her throat in pain.

"Agnis?" That was the first time Clay Judah had called her by her name.

He stood up and moved closer, but Agnis leapt back. She actually tried to take a step back, but she tripped over a bucket near her foot and fell dramatically. Clay Judah rushed to her and grabbed her arm in an attempt to help her. At that moment, Agnis abandoned all her plans.

She tried and tried, but she couldn't remember anything—she was drawing a complete blank. She could only assume that she had lost her mind.



Agnis lost herself in Clay Judah's arms, quivering as she clung to him. After time passed, she couldn't remember how long she was like that. It could have been an endless amount of time, or it could have been the time it takes a small bird to land on a branch and shake its head two or three times. All she knew for certain was that Clay Judah didn't push her away. Instead, he held her in silence.

As the time seemed to stand still, only K'nock was there to watch over his master.

When time once again resumed its normal pace, Agnis expressed her delight in Clay Judah's warm arms by peacefully closing her eyes. True happiness bubbled up deep inside her.

A long time ago, when she was a child, her father had held her like that. It was a warm, secure feeling—and it was the same now. But when Agnis really relaxed and let Clay Judah bear her whole weight, she suddenly was brought back to harsh reality. Clay Judah had taken her arm to make her stand up. Agnis opened her purple gemlike eyes and noticed a silent protest in his face.

Slightly troubled, but with great affection, Clay Judah uttered, "Agnis, I—"

But Agnis stopped Clay Judah by swiftly placing her hand on his mouth. Looking up at him with tear-filled eyes, she bit her lip. She didn't want to hear anymore.

She knew what the answer was—she knew Clay Judah's eyes didn't view her as a woman. In fact, they were analogous to the eyes of a parent worrying about how to comfort a child. The answer was undeniable.

As Agnis left Clay Judah's side, she tried to laugh it off. "I-it's nothing! I was a little homesick," she said as the tears again welled up in her eyes. She purposely followed her sniffle with a hearty laugh. "Ha ha! It's pathetic, isn't it? I just feel a

little homesick. Um, I'm planning to go home at once. I think it's best that I go home at once to ask my mother about why I can't use my magic anymore. The Opal said so, as well. S-so, I was thinking about going home . . . ha ha . . . and then, I suddenly missed it very much. I'm sorry!"

She rambled endlessly.

"I-I'm just gonna go cool my head," she declared, and she quickly turned her back on Clay Judah. Then, straightening her posture, she left the hut.

K'nock tried to follow her, but the door slammed into his nose. He turned around and looked at Clay Judah to find him chuckling. But his chuckle soon vanished. He opened the door for K'nock and, afterward, released a maudlin sigh.

CHAPTER 32



Early the next morning, Clay Judah, Agnis, and Duan bid farewell to the Opal and departed. Their destination was Agnis' home country, the Kingdom of Fiana, where they would deliver Agnis before returning to the Silver-Gray Castle. Land and Olba were supposed to be waiting there—although it wasn't certain whether Olba would be.

"I can return home by myself—well, not alone, but with K'nock. It's always been just the two of us!" declared Agnis.

Even though she declined their offer, Clay Judah firmly insisted.

"You can't take these mountains seriously enough. And it's not certain that we exterminated all the snow geniroes. There are other seasonal monsters you need to watch out for, too."

"Yeah, that's true. And anyway, I've been thinking about visiting your country," said Duan.

Agnis smiled and replied, "I suppose so. I have told my mother about you, Duan. And she did say that she would love to meet you."

Her lively spirit began to reemerge.

I wonder what happened, thought Duan. He couldn't tell by looking at the two of them.

Duan also felt a little lonely—a little left out. But it wasn't solely that. So far, Agnis had been very direct about her feelings with Duan. Of course, there were times when she annoyed him, but as a person of similar age, he felt that he could understand what she was going through, and he wanted to help her. But recently, she asked for his advice less and less. They never talked about anything, apart from silly childish chatter, and he could hardly tell what she was thinking anymore. This proved a little—no, *very* lonely. That was how important Agnis was to Duan—even more so than family.

It wasn't just Agnis, either; it was also Olba. They risked their lives together in battle, and they were traveling companions. Weren't they bound to become important people in one another's lives? But Duan thought that, perhaps, he was the only one who felt that way, which made him feel even lonelier.

Duan didn't allow himself to wallow in sentimentality for long, though. The group came to a point slightly below where they had encountered the snow geniroes. K'nock was the first to notice something. He glared at the snow's surface and began to emit a low-pitched growl. Then, the horses started to fuss.

Duan's horse, Judith, was especially frightened and would not even take a single step forward.

"Stay alert. There's something there!" yelled Clay Judah. Agnis opened her large eyes wide and stared intently all around her.

"Danger! Danger!" shouted the all-white Check noisily from atop Judith's head.

"Idiot! Don't panic!" yelled Duan, his heart pounding as he surveyed the area.

But there was nothing to be seen. The surface of the snow had settled and it seemed like there had been no change. After a while, K'nock stopped growling. The horses returned to normal, too.

"What was that?" asked Duan.

"Keep on your toes. There was definitely something there," concluded Clay Judah.

Suddenly, they heard a slithering noise that sounded like steam escaping from a narrow hole.

At the same time, snowballs came flying at them. To make matters worse, it was a large quantity of snowballs coming from all directions.

"Aah!"

"Argh!"

The horses started to run wild, and both Duan and Agnis were flung onto the snowy ground below.

"A-are you okay?" Duan reached his hand out to Agnis; and Agnis, getting covered in snow, grabbed on to it.

"What was that?" she cried.

"Dunno," he replied as the snowballs continued to fly.

Clay Judah came over astride Air. Air was, indeed, a warhorse. Small matters didn't perturb a trained horse. Unlike the panic-stricken Judith and Jocca, Air was so calm and collected that you wouldn't think they were the same species.

"Are you hurt?"

More and more snowballs hurled toward them, some pounding Air's muscular body and neck. Meanwhile, Judith and Jocca had left their masters and run off somewhere.

Seemingly out of nowhere, K'nock returned, holding something in his mouth, dragging it along. It was as long and as thick as an arm and white in color. It looked torn, and

something bloodlike trickled down it. But the blood wasn't red; it was blue in color.

Clay Judah dismounted Air, took the unknown object into his hand, and studied it.

"W-what is that?" asked Duan.

Clay Judah shook his head as he answered. "They weren't here the last time I came. . . . Who would have thought we'd meet them here." He stopped and threw the thin, long thing on top of the snow.

"They're tube marrows," he continued, "and judging from the quantity of snowballs, there are quite a few of them. They are seeing how we react as they batter us with snowballs. We have some time yet. But soon, they'll blow a blizzard—and their blizzards are so powerful that they can blow over horses."

"So, what part of its body was that bit? Its arm?"

"Well, its arm, but also its eyes and body. In short . . ."

Clay Judah started to explain, but there was no need. The monster in question had appeared in front of their very eyes.

CHAPTER 33



The tube marrow unexpectedly emerged from the snow, carving out a whirlpool and shaking its four long, fat tentacles. The snowballs seemed to shoot from the tips of its horrific appendages. It dripped blue blood because K'nock had torn off one of its tentacles.

Tube marrows have a total of five tentacles. The length of each tentacle is about three to four feet. It looked as though the four remaining feelers were growing out of the snow.

"Aah—no! Don't come near me. Go away!"

Disregarding Agnis' request, the wounded tube marrow shook its feelers and drew nearer.

"Duan, run away into the forest with Agnis! You can limit its movements over there, and you can hide in the trees," bellowed Clay Judah before attacking the monster.

Gug, geer! The tube marrow made creepy sounds as it writhed around because two of its four remaining tentacles were cut off. The blue blood splattered against the snow.

“Duan!”

Hearing his name once again, Duan finally regained his senses. *O-oh yeah. It's no time to be dazed. I have to take Agnis!*

“Come on Agnis—we're going.”

“What? Yes . . .” she replied, but she couldn't help feeling her chest tighten at the thought of leaving Clay Judah alone among the tube marrows. There had been scenes like this before, though, and more often than not, Agnis and Duan only got in the way.

K'nock's with Clay Judah, remembered Agnis. I should just listen to what he says.

She knew what she had to do, but her feet wouldn't move. Although her head understood what she needed to do, her emotions rejected it.

“Agnis?”

Duan, seeing her standing there with a pale face, thought that she was frozen with fear.

“Come on, Agnis!” he yelled in a loud voice, forcibly pulling her arm. After that, he walked with her in his arms. After a few steps, Agnis finally regained power over her emotions.

“S-sorry, Duan,” she said, and she embarked on the snowy path by herself.

“It's safer to be inside the forest,” Duan said.

Agnis, still noticeably pale, nodded in agreement.

Because it was a narrow pathway, Duan thought it would be easy to flee into the forest. But they were soon all too aware that this was not the case. The surrounding area was heaped with branches topped with snow; it was like a wall under the trees. The top of the pathway was not unlike an icy road; they had nothing to hang on to, and their footholds were slippery. It took all their strength just to stand up.



The tube marrow attacked them mercilessly.

"Shoot. Is there a place we can climb? Agnis, don't move—I'm just going to go check," instructed Duan, leaving Agnis on her own.

As the white powdery snow fluttered down, Agnis watched K'nock and Clay Judah fight and thought, *I know—maybe I'll be able to use my magic now. There's a need for it now. It's worth a go. I should try!*

It was decided. For the first time in a long while, she firmly gripped her rod and closed her eyes. She concentrated while quietly chanting her spell under her breath. As she opened her eyes, she thrust her rod upward, but nothing happened. Usually, power rippled through her body, followed by a strong wavelike feeling that crashed over her—enough to shake her fingertips. Agnis gazed at the powerless rod and let her arms hang loosely. All that came out was a sigh.

Then, an unforeseen flabby tentacle caught her off guard.

"Aaah!"

"Agnis!" Duan, who had just returned, held her and shielded her from the monster in front of them.

"Duan, what shall we do?" Agnis asked, wearing a terrified expression.

As soon as he looked at her face, a fighting spirit exploded inside Duan.

If I don't protect her, who will?

In times of great need, people are able to command an inhuman amount of strength. This was that time for Duan.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Clay Judah and K'nock surrounded by three tube marrows, fighting a tumultuous battle.

"Agnis, stay by my side!" he yelled. He made Agnis stand directly behind him, and then he withdrew his short sword.

"If I could use my magic, then this would be easy. How irritating!"

Agnis stood back to back with Duan and frowned.

That's true. If she could use her powerful Fire Magic—so powerful that it could burn up a hydra—these snow monsters would be easy, thought Duan.

But there wasn't any point in dwelling on that now. And as Clay Judah had said earlier, at first, the tube marrows attack with snowballs, but later, they'll attack using the terrifying blizzard.

I want to finish this before that starts. What have I learned from my few battle experiences? To calm down and look at my opponent's pattern of movement. And to read its mental state.

But in this case, there was no way to read the mental state of the tube marrow, and there was no real need.

All the tube marrow thought was, *"I'm gonna kill you!"*

What is its movement pattern? wondered Duan.

The tube marrows coiled their long tentacles around their body and released snowballs as they unwound them. Then, they repeated the process.

Duan observed the tube marrows while he was getting pelted with snowballs. When he examined the monsters closely, he noticed that after they coiled up their tentacles, they paused for a matter of seconds.

If I'm going to attack them, that's when I have to do it. And I should attack the main body, not the tentacles.

"Duan, what happened? Duan, if you don't hurry up, they'll use the blizzard!"

"I know. Calm down, Agnis." He soothed Agnis while he counted the time it took for the tube marrow to recoil its tentacles after extending them fully.

“One, two, three, four, five . . .”

It took about five seconds for it to return to its normal state.

That means if I step out—also taking into account the time it takes to fling down the short sword—I have only three seconds left. That means I should attack it one . . . two . . . three seconds after its arms are fully extended.

“Agnis, I’m going to attack him. Stay here.”

“What? Duan, are you going to be okay?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll try. If this doesn’t work, we’ll think about another way to escape.”

Agnis looked at Duan as if she’d met him for the first time. He answered her so calmly. He seemed more mature.

I thought so in the battle at the Silver-Gray Castle, too. Duan is definitely getting stronger.

Duan didn’t notice Agnis’ surprise, as he was focused on waiting patiently for the correct timing for the attack. Then it finally came: “One, two, three—now!” He stepped out with all his courage and plunged down his sword without hesitation. He felt a strong resistance.

Guuooer!

The tube marrow let out a deathly agonizing shriek, enough to make one want to cover one’s ears, and then it writhed in pain. Duan had managed to slash the tube marrow’s body to the point that it sprayed blue blood as though it were a fountain. The five tentacles had lost their system of order and were now chaotically flinging snowballs in random directions. Eventually, the tentacles slumped to the ground.

“Yay!”

It was an unbelievable sensation—Duan had really killed a tube marrow with one blow.

“Wow, Duan, that was amazing!” Agnis cheered happily, patting his back. Duan whipped around joyfully, and they gave each other a high five.

Agnis pointed to a second tube marrow. “Oh no, look, here comes another!”

Duan rolled up his sleeves and said, “Come on—I can take you all! Come on!”

CHAPTER 34



Duan's participation in combat was impressive, even by Clay Judah's and Knock's standards. Although the tube marrows' appearance, aggressive moments, and specialty attack—the blizzard—were terrifying, their defense wasn't particularly strong. Once you grasped the timing of their tentacles' movements, you could take the monsters out like clockwork.

"Take that! Argh!"

Duan was getting sprayed with all the blue blood that gushed forth, and his face and clothes were slowly turning blue. The tube marrows, on the other hand, saw that the situation was now disadvantageous and had steadily started to flee. But Duan did not let them.

"Stop, I won't let you get away!" he yelled as he killed them one after another.

"Hey, Duan, don't chase them too far!" called Clay Judah, but Duan wasn't listening. After he had killed about

ten, his adventurer card flashed brightly and made a jangly pinging noise.

A level up? he thought. At that instant, the tube marrow he was chasing reverted back, readying itself for a counterattack. It collected all its tentacles into a bunch and protruded them once again, aiming for Duan.

“Duan, the blizzard is coming!” warned Clay Judah.

“What?”

The tube marrow spurted out a savage blizzard, along with a thunderous roar, from all its tentacles. It was aimed straight for Duan, but the tube marrow missed him by a hair because, only a moment earlier, Duan went flying. Of course, Duan doesn’t have wings, so it wasn’t like he was *really* flying. Rather, he jumped.

Immediately afterward, he slashed at the tube marrow’s base. The tube marrow thrashed around as it released its blizzard. The tentacles that were earlier bunched together were now moving separately, twirling around, but they soon lost their strength.

Duan couldn’t remember what had occurred during that split second. He didn’t know why he thought to jump, or how he was able to slash at the monster so quickly. But as he turned around slowly, breathing heavily, he saw that Agnis and Clay Judah appeared impressed.

“Wow, wow! Duan, what was that? You were like a different person!” cried Agnis as she clapped her hands.

Duan took out his adventurer card and said, “I think I leveled up. Agnis, I’m finally at the same level as you.”

“You’ll soon be overtaking me at this rate!” she proclaimed.

“R-really?” He laughed with embarrassment and scratched his head. Duan felt that it could be true. Something had changed inside of him.



That resistance. That feeling as the sword came down—it felt good. It felt almost as though the sword was an extension of my arm, like it was a part of my body.

He picked up some snow and started to scrub his short sword, which was covered in blue blood. He took out an old cloth from his backpack and wiped his short sword a bit more before returning it to its sheath.

“Duan, look at your face!” said Agnis. Using her own silk handkerchief, she wiped away the blood from Duan’s face. As Duan felt the smoothness of the handkerchief against his cheeks, he became overwhelmed with satisfaction.

“It’s just that it was different this time. The way I swung the sword—the way I killed the enemy. Until now, I was doing things blindly. I didn’t know what I was doing with all that blood rushing to my head. But this time, something awoke inside of me—inside my brain. That’s it, isn’t it?” he asked Clay Judah excitedly.

Clay Judah smiled and replied, “Let’s rest first and get going in a bit. It seems as though the horses are back, too.”

As soon as Clay Judah mentioned it, Duan noticed that Jocca and Judith had returned from down the mountain.

“No, I don’t need to rest. And I don’t want to stay here around all these corpses. Let’s get to the inns in one go!” Duan said energetically.

As he jumped onto Judith’s back, he didn’t feel tired. In fact, he felt confident that he could take on another group of monsters. Duan patted Judith’s neck and said, smiling, “Hey, if something happens next time, please don’t run away.”

“My Duan, aren’t *you* happy!” chuckled Agnis as she climbed onto Jocca.

Jocca seemed a little disheartened having left her master behind, but Judith, on the other hand, seemed fine.

Check, who had been trembling furiously inside Duan's pocket until now, poked his head out and spoke very pompously. "Phew! I didn't know what was going to happen. Duan, well done for leveling up! Giis!"

"Why, thank you, Master Check, it's an honor!" Duan replied. Agnis and Duan both fell into a fit of laughter. The tense scene from earlier seemed like a dream away.

Their laughter rose up above the snow-covered trees and escaped through the narrow slit into the skies high above.

CHAPTER 35



Princess Agnis, who is that gentleman called Clay Judah?" asked her maid-in-waiting Manuela in an eager voice. Manuela wasn't the only one getting excited about Clay Judah and Duan—all the other women who worked at Agnis' mother, Rubis', mansion were getting excited, as well. But Agnis wasn't giving her very much information, which left Manuela very disappointed.

"Where is he from? Judging from his elegant features, he must be a nobleman. Maybe he's a knight?" prodded Manuela.

Even with questions like these, all Agnis said in response was, "Hmm, I don't know."

"Well, is he married? I didn't see a ring, so he must be single. But if he *is* a man of position, he might have a fiancée."

Once again, Agnis answered coolly. "I'm not interested."
Manuela didn't understand.

A girl coming of age, and with such a lovely person in her presence—how can she say that she's not interested? Perhaps Princess Agnis is keener on Master Duan? wondered Manuela.

She soon started worrying about something else, instead. Ever since Agnis returned to the mansion, she hadn't spoken much to Duan or Clay Judah, and she stayed in her room a lot.

Whenever Manuela asked, "Princess Agnis, are you not feeling well?" Agnis would reply, "I'm fine, I'm just tired. Can you leave me alone?" Then, she'd curl up in a blanket and not come out.

Duan and Clay Judah were enjoying a relaxing time, which they hadn't done in a long time. As Duan had recently leveled up, he followed Clay Judah around, hoping to get him to impart some sword-fighting essentials.

"There is a charm to magic, but the sword is the fighter's main tool, don't you think?" asked Duan. "I always thought I wasn't at all suited for it, so I'm really surprised. Not that I'm blowing my own trumpet or anything. I guess you can never tell what you can do. I've learned that now for the first time."

The living room was decorated plainly in beige and pale green—it was a setting in which you could relax comfortably. Clay Judah and Duan sat on a cozy sofa and sipped a pleasantly scented tea. From the polished windows, they could see trees and flowers in the glorious sunlight—it looked like a painting. They could also hear a bird singing somewhere in the distance.

Clay Judah listened to Duan as he spoke, enjoying all that surrounded him.

"S-so, I was wondering whether you could train with me today or tomorrow. I've only ever been taught by Olba, never by anyone else. I've never been taught formally, of course."

“Well, if you’ve been taught by Olba, I’m sure that’s enough. He’s a skilled swordsman. I probably couldn’t beat him.”

“Really? N-no, I don’t mean that Olba is weak or anything. He really is amazing. But you’re . . . how do you say this . . . a bit different. Olba seems as though he’s all strength. He wins his fights with brute force. But you’re different, aren’t you? No matter what I do, I’ll always be this type of body, and I don’t have the strength—or even the potential for sheer strength—of Olba’s little finger.”

“Olba’s strength isn’t due to his physicality alone. But it’s true, I’m not that strong, either. That’s why I’m always equipped with lightweight armor,” Clay Judah explained.

Clay Judah wasn’t wearing any armor at present. Instead, he wore a soft silk blue shirt and black pants that Agnis’ mother had gotten ready. Duan also had changed and was wearing a pale blue shirt and deep blue pants. On top, he wore a velvet jacket in the same color as his pants. Although they were simpler than the heavily decorated clothes that had been prepared for him at the Silver-Gray Castle, they were luxurious nonetheless. But he didn’t feel that strange in them now. Maybe it was because he was used to them.

“Anyway,” continued Clay Judah, “I plan on leaving tomorrow. How about you? I’ve promised Land, so I’m returning to the Silver-Gray Castle at once.”

Duan thought that he might, assuming Clay Judah would leave tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. But before he answered, Duan briefly thought about Agnis. *What will she do? If Clay Judah is going, she’ll probably say she’s coming, too.*

Duan smiled and answered, “Of course I’ll go with you.”

CHAPTER 36



hen Duan visited Agnis' room to talk about leaving the next day, she was in her mother, Rubis', room.

She wanted to tell her mother about her experience of suddenly not being able to use her magic, to discuss the reasons why it had happened and how to fix it.

Rubis, who had not seen her daughter's face for a long time, thought she had matured a little. She couldn't say exactly in what way, but she could definitely see something that was close to sorrow in Agnis' eyes.

Agnis spoke to her mother about how she had chanted her spell when the Red Knights that had been summoned by a sorcerer surrounded her. She explained that nothing happened, and that she hadn't even felt the usual wave of energy that usually accompanied the spell. She also told Rubis about when she encountered the next enemy, at which point she was again unable to use her magic.

"I don't feel anything at all. It's never happened to me before. I've tried loads since then . . . but nothing."

Once she had heard the whole story, Rubis gestured as though she understood.

"Agnis, that's because you thought your enemies were human. You've only ever used your offensive magic on monsters for which you had unquestionable hostility. Even if you did have hostility for them, and however much it was rightfully used in self-defense, you're unable to burn and slay human beings—period."

Agnis was a little disappointed that her mother's answer was so simple.

Is that really it?

"O-oh, b-but why have I not been able to use my power since then? Just recently, on our way here, all sorts of monsters attacked us. It was on a wintry mountain pathway, which is always dangerous."

Rubis frowned as she listened to her daughter's stories about getting attacked by monsters. It was now unavoidable that she was an adventurer. But she didn't listen calmly for long, and she couldn't help but ask, "What sort of monsters?"

"Well, at the beginning, there were tube marrows—monsters with five tentacles that suddenly appeared from the snow. At first, they only shoot snowballs at you, but later, they attack you with a blizzard. And it was amazing. Duan killed about ten of them all on his own. And that was how he leveled up."

"Oh really. And after that?" Rubis asked.

"Oh, after that?"

Glancing up at the ceiling, Agnis recalled what had happened and recounted it to her mother. Yes, after the tube marrows, they'd encountered all sorts of monsters.

"We're unlucky this year," Clay Judah had said with a frustrated tone. Agnis remembered that clearly.

After the tube marrows, there had been one giant gray chimera—it was a gray bear and a gray wolf chimera. At first, they discussed how they would dodge it and run away, but it was unusually belligerent and ruthlessly followed them for ages. In the end, K'nock, Clay Judah, and Duan managed to kill the massive beast together.

Next, there was the ikkip slime. They were a type of slime that appeared in cold regions or high altitude regions. You would get frostbite just by touching them. And if you happened to eat them, your stomach would become inflamed and you would die instantly. Of course, nobody said they wanted to eat the slime, but they struggled to fight them nevertheless. They were small targets and they also jumped around clumsily. Luckily, they never touched the slime, but their capes had holes all over them. Again, Duan had exhibited an amazing amount of participation. He hadn't swung his sword through the air; instead, using his own cape, he'd knocked them all to the ground and then used a torchlight to burn them.

"I tried my best to use my magic that time, too. All these monsters have no resistance to fire. I thought that my magic would be really effective but . . ." Agnis said.

She raised her head. "What if I can never use magic again?"

Rubis sighed and gently stroked Agnis' cheek. "It would be a great relief to me if you couldn't use it again."

Agnis' face soured. Seeing this, Rubis smiled sweetly and said, "But I don't think that would make you stop adventuring. Knowing you, you'd probably find another career that was as thrilling and filled with ups and downs as adventuring. Okay, I'll tell you why you can't use your magic."

Rubis sat down beside Agnis and took her hand in her own. "Agnis, you're in love, aren't you?"

Agnis' cheeks were hot, as though they were on fire.

Rubis continued, "I thought that might be so. The first time you couldn't use magic was because you were convinced that your opponent was human. At that moment, you put on your brakes. And the brakes haven't come off since. The Fire Spirits haven't been able to do it. You have to do it yourself, but you have to be free from thought. Right now, you're unable to be free from thought. When I saw you come in with that gentleman, I felt it immediately. You're in love with Clay Judah, yes?"

Agnis opened her eyes wide and stared at Rubis. "B-but it was useless," she cried. "Mother, I used my courage and I tried to confess my love for him, but . . ."

That was all she could say. Tears started to fill her eyes and eventually poured down her face. After that, she buried her face in her mother's lap and wept like a child. K'nock, who was sprawled out on the floor, looked up, concerned, but Rubis smiled to indicate that everything was okay.

Rubis' room was unusually quiet. All that could be heard was Agnis' weeping. The tears wouldn't stop and her emotions had escalated so much that they were almost too much to bear. As Agnis continued to sob, she realized that she really was upset and traumatized by it all.

She had thought that, although it had ended in failure, she had confessed her love and was done with it. She was able to continue talking with Clay Judah as she did before, and she was certain that Duan hadn't noticed. But everything that she had bottled up until now came gushing out.

As she cried, she realized that her mind and body were exhausted. Rubis stroked her daughter's slender back. The warmth from her hand was indescribably comforting and made Agnis eventually stop crying, allowing her to drift into a deep sleep.



CHAPTER 37



It was the next morning when Duan finally managed to tell Agnis that they were leaving for the Silver-Gray Castle. Nobody could wake her—that was how deeply she slept.

“Agnis, what will you do?” asked Duan.

She immediately replied, “I’m coming with you, of course. Let’s go adventuring again!”

“What?”

“I think Olba will be waiting for us. If he is, the three of us can team up again. What do you think?”

“W-well, that’s fine. But Agnis, what about your magic? Is it all right? Fully recovered?”

“Oh that . . .” Agnis remembered what her mother had told her that morning: “I’m sure your magic will return. I think everything will be resolved after your cry and deep sleep yesterday. Listen, using magic is extremely taxing on an emotional level. I’m sure you know this, but it’s more

demanding than you think. You will have to learn how to control it."

Rubis proceeded to point to a map on the wall.

"There is a country over the seas called Ronza. I hear there's a place there that will teach you the technique of controlling magic. You should study there. It's no use if you can only use level 10 magic, right?"

Everything her mother said was important. Agnis summarized what she had said to Duan. Naturally, she didn't tell him about the love part.

"Okay, yeah. Maybe it *would* be good to study magic. You're certainly at level 10 fire! It's a waste for you to use it on the weaker monsters. And you faint right afterward, too."

"Hmph, *sorry!* Oh, weren't you going to study magic, too?"

"Oh, that. Well, I do want to, eventually, but I think I might live by the sword for now!"

"Live by the sword?"

Agnis, taken aback, looked at Duan.

"Oh, by the way, I've been meaning to ask. What did the Opal say to you? He said something about magic, right?"

"No, the Opal didn't say a thing about magic. He said something about carrying great power . . . but I didn't really understand."

"Oh, right. But Clay Judah was saying that the Opal only tells you what you really need to hear at that moment."

"What you really need to hear?"

"Yes. Maybe, you, at least right now, don't need to learn magic yet?"

"Oh, I get it! That's right. I've been thinking that maybe I should concentrate on sword training rather than magic. That's why the Opal didn't say one word about magic."

Recently, Duan had been feeling very confident. With Agnis' comment, he felt even more so.

He could barely wait to report back to Olba on what had happened. And he longed to start training. In fact, he would rather be chocking up real battles.

An Agnis able to control her magic and a stronger me—and also the veteran fighter, Olba. What amazing members!

Duan couldn't suppress his giggles or the smile spreading across his face. He'd had the same problem when they'd left Rubis' mansion, heading toward the Silver-Gray Castle.

"Stop it, you weirdo. What are you smiling to yourself for?"

Agnis found it a little weird, and even Clay Judah looked at him suspiciously.

The three of them journeyed together joyfully. The hooves of their horses reverberated through the tranquil forest. They would soon be seeing the beautiful sight of the Silver-Gray Castle.

Will Olba and Land be waiting for us? contemplated Duan. *Maybe Olba left already.*

But Duan needn't have worried. Olba was there, right next to Land. But Duan never would have imagined what kind of situation the two of them faced at that moment. . . .

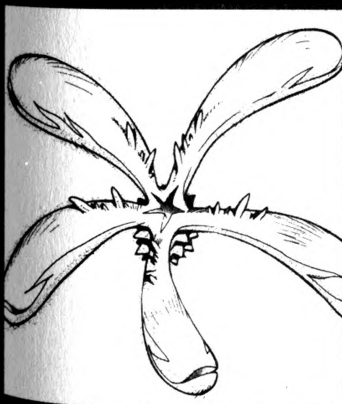
SNOW GENIROE:



A type of geniroe. At just less than three feet, its height and character are similar to regular geniroe. Its round body is covered in white bristles, which almost make it look like a spirit of hair—no, I mean snow. The snow geniroe has terrifying teeth, and if it bites you, you will be paralyzed for a short while. Although it isn't life threatening, a bite can be an obstacle in battle, so beware. Like the geniroe, its red eyes are nearly blind. In contrast to geniroe, which judge their enemy's location by their smell, the snow geniroe uses its noise. So, if you really don't want to fight one, you should flee without a sound. It frequently attacks nearby villages and, like the regular

geniroe, its favorite foods are children and young animals. If you happen to see one, please exterminate it. If extermination is not possible, please get in touch with the Adventurer Support Group as soon as possible.

TUBE MARROW:



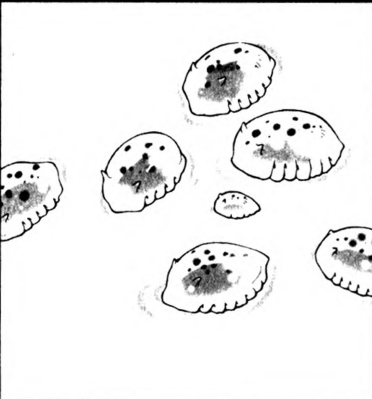
A terrifying monster that inhabits regions of heavy snowfall. To start, it twirls its five fat, long tentacles and throws snowballs to block the routes of opponents who are trying to flee—and to gain some time. To gain time for what? To get ready for its other attack—the blizzard. Once it is ready, it bunches together its tentacles and blows a blizzard all at once. This attack is extremely powerful. It is said that an animal as powerful as a horse would die immediately if it took this attack head on. The tube marrow's weakness is its body; it is also weak against direct attacks. It is effective to somehow deflect its snowball attack and strike its body.

GIANT GRAY CHIMERA:



A chimera of a gray bear and a gray wolf, it has a gigantic body of more than six feet. The vision of it standing up on its hind legs, coming after you and baring its sharp wolf fangs is truly a nightmare. It is a monster with the combined power of a gray wolf's brutality and cunning, and the ferocity and the great strength of a gray bear. Use every available method to slay it. But be prepared, as its strength is really not to be taken lightly. Even if you try to flee halfway through, its persistence will stun you.

IKKIP SLIME:



Slime that lives in cold regions. Its flabby body is less like jelly and more like gummy sweets. It is whitish and has speckles of blue and red as sesame seeds do. It appears in groups and attacks by bouncing around. You get frostbite just by touching it, and it is said that if you eat one, your stomach will inflame immediately, and you will die. Even so, it isn't a particularly strong opponent; but because it's small, it's difficult to attack it with swords and arrows. The most effective attacks are Fire Magic attacks.

THE ADVENTURES OF DUAN SURK

ASSASSIN KILLER



STORY BY MISHIO FUKAZAWA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY TAKAO OTOKITA
DESIGN BY YOSHINIKO KAMABE

CHAPTER I



hey're gone . . ." whispered Land.

Olba laughed, but his eyes were still following Duan and the others, who were riding away on their horses. From the castle gates, it was possible to see all the way down the road, until it reached the outskirts of town. And one step out of the town, this same road connected to the highway. This highway went up a hill and then down it before it pushed its way through the forest.

Of course, it wasn't like Olba watched the whole ride—but he did watch them for quite a long time. Sven and Land observed Olba doing this and found it a little strange, because it was unusually sentimental behavior for Olba, who was looking satisfied and at peace as he was remembering the first time he met Duan.

How it all started . . . when Olba picked up Duan just before the boy was about to collapse from hunger.

He fainted when he tried to steal my food, I think. Laughter rose up inside Olba automatically. *He was only half a man when I set*

him to a manual task, but I could always trust what he said somehow. Doing this kind of business for so many years, you lose the habit of being able to trust someone. But that day, he'd been crying like a kid, and it got to me.

Olba laughed again, and then he placed his unlit, rolled cigarette into his mouth and started to walk back to the castle.

Land followed behind Olba's expansive back, directing a question toward Sven and the others, who also were returning to the castle, "So, was my request heard?"

His request was, of course, to leave the Assassin Guild. Sven and Edward Zamut exchanged glances, but it was Sven who answered, "Hmph. Well, it seems as if it will be difficult but . . . well, now that the ex-King Liesbeck has taken it under his consideration, I'm sure you can relax."

Hearing this response, Land actually was a little disappointed. *Well, that was a roundabout way of saying things. Even if it is the ex-king dealing with it, we're talking about the Assassin Guild here—it isn't gonna be resolved easily.*

Although Land was prepared for this, he sighed deeply. His wound, which wasn't fully recovered yet, started to pulse with pain again.

"Hey, shouldn't you rest? You're looking pale."

Land was planning to do so without Olba's instruction. "Yeah, will do," he answered shortly.

He pressed on his shoulder and started to make his way to the guestroom he'd been allocated—but then, he suddenly thought of something and said to Olba, "Hey, you . . ."

Olba, who had started to return to his allocated guestroom, as well, stopped. "Huh, what?"

Land said to him, "Um, you don't have Duan anymore, right? And I don't have Clay Judah, either."

Olba remained silent as he pondered what Land was trying to say.

Land continued, "Well, could I come to your room? I get bored when I don't have someone to talk to."

Olba was about to say something, but he stopped and nodded to signal that he didn't mind.

Land's pale face reddened a little. "Thanks! I'll be around in a while with my luggage."

"Okay."

Olba understood it, Land's anxiety. What if his request to leave had reached the Assassin Guild? In the worst case scenario, the guild could already be preparing to send a deadly assassin message in return.

CHAPTER 2



A few days later, after Olba and Land had spent several nights together in the same room, they were relaxing in their quarters, not doing anything in particular. Land's wound was healing well, and Olba was fully enjoying being treated as a guest of the king.

Olba woke late in the morning, eating a superb meal for lunch (instead of a late breakfast). Then, he spent the afternoons lazing about with Land until sunset. His nights were spent drinking until morning while flirting with the girls of the castle. . . .

"Living like this every day, we're going to become spoiled rotten," Olba declared.

But Land smirked and said laughingly, "So, you wanna stop?"

Olba raised an eyebrow. "No way. I'll enjoy this for a good while yet."

Land felt inwardly relieved when he heard his reply. He felt like everything was okay now, but only because Olba was

with him. If he were left alone . . . Although they were inside a castle, he definitely couldn't—or shouldn't—relax. He knew this better than anyone else, because he himself was an assassin.

But if I weren't waiting here, it would be difficult for me to reunite with Clay Judah.

Land thought of something: Maybe . . . Is the reason I've become so attached to Clay Judah self-protection? There isn't anyone else more reliable, that much is true. I haven't been keeping his company for long, but I can still say that for sure. He would never betray me. No, but . . . It can't be for self-protection!

Land continued sorting through his thoughts. He truly felt destiny had a hand in his having met Clay Judah.

"So, hey," Land spoke up, changing the topic to avoid his own doubts and anxiety, "you're getting on well with that girl, Hyness."

Olba raised his eyebrows, then closing his eyes and exhaling slowly said, "Speaking of which, you're not doing so bad yourself. What's her name again—that blonde chick?"

"Oh, you mean Liruge?"

"Yeah, yeah. Liruge, Ziruge—whatever it is. What happened yesterday? You were back late. She didn't wanna let you go?"

Land laughed in response.

"Stop that ambiguous laughter," Olba teased, and Land laughed even more.

The previous night had been a fun night indeed. Liruge was a court maid—having only just turned twenty. Her blonde, wavy hair was beautiful, and she was a sunny, bright girl—the perfect match for Land, who'd always had a pessimistic disposition.

Yet when Liruge had covered Land's eyes with her hands and asked him "guess who," he'd been so surprised that he



jumped. Her cold, thin fingers had felt so much like those of Misty—the girl he'd met in the Assassin Guild, whom he'd loved so much that it had caused him to sell his soul.

At the time, Land has been suddenly overcome by emotion, and he'd hugged Liruge tightly. She'd been pleased by his enthusiastic response, thinking that he truly liked her. Land had let her misunderstand.

Man, I'm a dishonest guy.

Apart from her slender fingers Liruge was exactly the opposite of Misty. Although Land had continued to hug her, all his thoughts were on Misty.

I wonder what she's doing now.

She had been sold to the guild, the same as Land. But hers was an awful story: Her own sister had sold her off. She'd lost her parents, and without a place to go, she could turn only to her sister, who was married and lived in the city. But when Misty had, her sister had sold her to the guild at a high price. Even so, Misty didn't blame her sister.

"I'm sure my sis was just in trouble. She had five children to look after, and her husband didn't earn much. She couldn't afford to feed me, too," Misty had said with her obsidian-like eyes sparking blue.

"And anyway, she didn't know she'd sold me to the Assassin Guild. She thought she was selling me as a maid to a merchant."

That much may have been true, considering how detached the Assassin Guild was from the general public—although, the man she was drinking with now also was an assassin (unbeknownst to her, there was another guild nearby, too).

Her real name was Cathy Bready. She was seventeen, and it was winter when she'd been sold to the guild.

At the beginning, she'd been made to do servant's work—cooking, cleaning, and laundry, among other things. But as she'd grown older, her beauty had blossomed and showed its potential. The guild's boss waited until she turned twenty before deciding the time was right to turn her into an assassin, his ultimate objective.

One day Cathy was called to see the boss, who told her, "Your name is Misty from today. Understood?"

When she heard this, she understood everything. Having worked as a servant in the Assassin Guild for three years, it was only logical that she'd have figured out what this place actually was. From her conversations with the assassins, she was already knowledgeable about the rules of the Assassin Guild and the ways you could dispose of someone.

In the end, most of the assassins gave up on having their own lives. It was so difficult to leave the guild that not a single person had ever done so successfully. So, you had to numb your soul to it—the only alternative was to be killed.

When the boss handed her the red poison, Cathy, like many others, quietly sunk her own life, her own soul, into the depths of that bottle. Thus, she turned into Misty.

CHAPTER 3



he'd always been an intelligent and quick-witted girl. She was also nimble, and rarely clumsy. The only times Misty failed were when the information about her target was ambiguous. For example, there were times her target was supposed to be a man but was a woman instead, or when there was somebody else there when there wasn't supposed to be—or the opposite. Sometimes, she'd work with somebody who would get the sequence of events wrong. However, on the whole, she rarely failed. Her success rate was ninety percent, a number the guild's boss would brag about.

She always tied her long black hair elegantly at the back. She had long eyelashes that she curled, and her eyes were black with a sparkle of blue. The whites of her eyes also had a tinge of blue to it, making her eyes look as clear as a baby's. There wasn't a single blemish on her bright white skin. And finally, her moist lips were painted crimson.

Misty's usual technique was to charm her targets with her beauty and then place poison into their glass. When she was unable to use this technique, she would use the drastic move of brushing her lips with the poison before kissing her target. Of course, she endangered herself when she did this, but Misty had the antidote, and she'd also trained herself to build up a resistance to the poison, so she would be unharmed if it were only for a short while.

There was one time when she'd slipped up, though. Her target had been a strong warrior. The entire village had come together and asked to have him killed because his personality was so brutal. He was truly violent, and when he started to wreak havoc, no one could stop him. If anyone were stupid enough to try, they'd usually be struck away. All this would've been acceptable if people were only acquiring minor injuries in the frays, but there were times when individuals landed in such a bad way, it caused their death. Homes, too, had been destroyed.

Misty, as usual, decided to use seduction as her tool. She poured some poison into the warrior's glass, but he dropped it and started to rush toward her. She wasn't alarmed and she didn't panic; rather, she calmly took out her poison from between her breasts and brushed her lips with it once. She closed her eyes and showed the man her lips, which he devoured hungrily. Misty then quickly stepped away from him, wiping off her lips.

The poison was supposed to work immediately. At first, the targets seemed to fall asleep, but soon they stopped breathing. However, this warrior's body was strong against this poison, too. Although he faltered a little, he hugged her tightly and wouldn't let go.

Misty panicked. She knew she had to drink the antidote that was in her dress pocket soon! She struggled against him

desperately, but he wouldn't budge. On top of that, when the poison finally began affecting him, he fell asleep with Misty still in his grip.

Misty used all her might to escape from those thick arms, but no matter what she did, the strength in those arms would not weaken. After a while, her own head started to feel a little fuzzy—the poison was getting to her.

When she finally thought she'd had it and was starting to lose consciousness, the warrior's body suddenly went limp. Misty could move her legs and arms freely. She quickly retrieved the antidote from her dress pocket and poured it into her mouth. When she looked up expecting relief, however, she got quite a fright—the poison had taken effect. Thankfully, the guild boss was standing there, glaring down at her grimly.

"The boss is fond of you," Garcina, one of the servants, had said to her later, while she was recovering. Yes, after this event, Misty had been bedridden, thanks to the poison that had moved all through her body. It had taken a whole week for it to clear.

The boss had given details of the job to Misty, but he'd heard rumors about the strong warrior that was her target and became worried, so he'd followed her. Lucky for Misty, he'd saved her—without a moment to spare.

Misty had felt a strange emotion fill her soul. The boss, who'd always looked so sour, began to feel like a parental figure. She found her peace when she started to convince herself that the boss was like a father to her. After that, Misty had obeyed the boss with vigilance.

And then, one day, a slender redheaded man was brought to the guild, still unconscious. That man was Land.

CHAPTER 4



It didn't take long for Land and Misty to become lovers.

There wasn't a single man who wouldn't have been besotted by Misty. That was how strangely attractive she was. Her black eyes that sparkled blue always had a moistness to them, and it was always difficult to figure out what Misty was thinking. Men were enraptured by that mystique.

Land was surprised when he discovered that he had been brought to an Assassin Guild, but he was even more surprised when he learned that Misty was an assassin, too. He never would've imagined that the woman who'd been caring for him was an assassin. He'd thought she must be someone who looked after the assassins . . . or maybe the boss's daughter.

So, even now, he could clearly remember the night when she returned after having successfully completed a job. His wounds had begun to heal, and he'd been able to sit up a bit. As he hadn't seen Misty during the evening, he decided to wait up

until she returned, as she'd have to pass Land's room to enter her own room, which was on the second floor.

It was getting late when she came back alone, wearing a deathly black cape that blended in with the darkness, and a dress underneath that hugged her figure tightly.

"Where on Earth have you been?"

Misty opened her eyes wide at Land's voice, which had come out suddenly from the darkness. The lantern that shone against her white face showed that her face was twitching, and her cheeks were also unusually blushed. Land was filled with dread at this unusual sight. Misty didn't reply to him; instead, she started to return to her own room. Land tried to stand up and follow her, having forgotten that his body wouldn't move exactly as he wanted. His wound hurt, and he curled up on the spot in agony.

"Argh!"

Misty thought about leaving him as he was, but she decided to come back. She put her hand on Land's shoulder as he lay there curled up in pain. "You shouldn't be getting up."

Land grabbed hold of her slender wrists and looked into her eyes. "Answer my question. You're trembling. What were you doing, and where?"

She bit her red lips and looked back at Land.

Land understood immediately when he looked into those eyes, but he just couldn't believe it. "N-no . . . not you, too!"

Misty narrowed her eyes and spat out the words, "Yes, exactly what you're thinking. I'm one of them. I just went to complete a job."

"You're j-joking! You're tiny—how?"

"Today's target was a merchant. He was apparently quite a vicious tradesman and was loathed by many—not that it means anything to us. If he were offered some wine by a young woman, he'd happily drink it."

“So, you put poison in his glass?”

Misty didn't answer Land's question. She slowly removed his hand from her wrist and stood up. “When your wound's healed, you'll have to work, too. You were sold to this place.”

“Y-you've gotta be kidding me! I'm a thief, but an adventurer thief. I'm not gonna kill nobody! I can't believe you, with that pretty face of yours . . . that you've just come back from killing somebody?”

Misty's eyes flared up for one second as though they were on fire. It was the fire of hatred, sadness, and rage. But it was only for one second. Soon, her whole body was enveloped in fatigue and resignation. “No one can ever leave this guild,” she whispered, and then she went away to her room.

Just as Misty had said, Land soon had to start working, as well.

“Small jobs to begin with. I'll give you easy ones so you don't screw them up,” the boss said before explaining the details of Land's first job to him.

The target was an old man. He was very sick and was now bed-ridden. Surprisingly, it was the old man himself who'd made the request. He didn't want to suffer any more, and his request was to die peacefully.

“N-no way! I wouldn't do that even if it meant I had to die. I can't do it!”

The boss grabbed Land's head with his strong fists. “Well, I can fulfill your words if that's what you want, I really can kill you. We have plenty of pros here. Why don't I get your favorite, Misty, to poison you?”

The other assassins around him started to guffaw. Misty looked away.

“Please. I beg you. I can't . . . I can't . . .”

As Land begged with his head to the ground, the boss threw the old man's address and the rope Land was to use to kill him down, saying, "You can talk like that after you've finished your job. You don't have time now. You have to do this tonight."

Land's hands were still on the ground, and his head hung low. One of the other middle-aged assassins, Tony, started to speak to him.

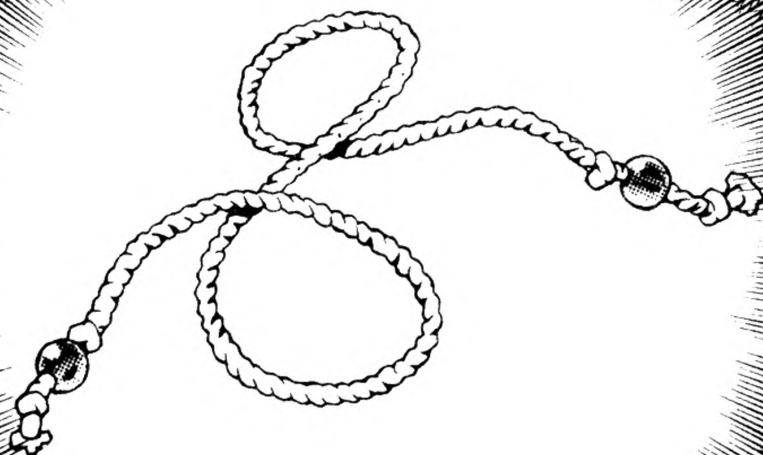
"Use that rope. Do it quickly. It won't take you five minutes. But make sure you get it done—otherwise, it's bad. Put your strength into it, and check—check that the old man's done."

Something broke inside Land. He stood up and started to yell at the boss's back. "I don't do anything that I don't want to do, no matter what anyone says to me!"

The boss turned around slowly and replied, "You just don't get it, do you? Either you do the job or *you* die. You decide."

Land found out later, to his severe detriment, that the boss had not been exaggerating. He didn't do the job, instead trying to run away to another part of the town—but he must have been followed, and he was taken back in no time. Then, he was hung upside down for three days and three nights. Every three hours, salt was rubbed into his recovering wounds. Of course, he was given no food—only water was thrown at him. In the end, he fainted.

When he woke up, he saw Misty's worried face. It was as though he woke up back in time, back to when he was sold to the Assassin Guild after being rescued by the old woman, after having been beaten by the Salamander. It was exactly the same situation all over again. Land thought time had been rewound. But he knew it wasn't so when he heard Misty speak.



She spoke to him as she looked at him in a heartbreaking way. "Land, I told you: We don't have the right to decide. Either you kill or get killed. You have to choose."

And just like Misty had warned, Land had to accept the job. His first job was the one the boss had given him initially. When it was finished, he truly felt what a cruel job being an assassin was. Even though it was a death that the old man had wished for, Land's tears would not stop when he watched the old man lose his strength in his arms. And yet, Land couldn't choose to die himself.

Can I really go on like this? he wondered to himself, day in and day out.

But he couldn't exactly worry to himself at leisure. The boss gave him job after job at a very quick pace. Land knew that his senses were being numbed. And then, after he'd finished a few targets, he felt something inside him die; he had the vague awareness that this was something precious, which could never be regained.

CHAPTER 5



ense of loss, anxiety, guilt, and all kinds of other related feelings tormented Land, and nights passed with him getting only the lightest of sleep. Even when he closed his eyes, his nerves got to him so much that a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. His heart beat powerfully, and it was too noisy to sleep. If he got up, though, he felt like the grim reaper was grinning and watching him, and he shivered in his dark room.

That was why he slept with Misty. She, no doubt, knew exactly what Land was going through. She didn't ask anything of him, simply trusting her body into his care.

When he sunk his head into her soft bosom, all his wounds and pain seemed to fade away.

It was the same for Misty. When Land had appeared, the forgotten pain had come back to her. But Misty also really liked Land. His mischievous eyes sometimes changed into the eyes of an abandoned dog. He was expressive, and she never got bored of him.

Rather than lovers, it was almost as though the two paired up like a couple of abandoned dogs—cuddling close to each other to keep the cold away.

The boss didn't say anything to them, but he judged that it was a good time for Land, so he started giving him relatively easy jobs periodically. The only requirement the boss had was that Land was not drink the day before a job.

Apart from the emotional discord, Land didn't find the jobs particularly hard for him. After all, he was an agile and skilled adventurer. So, in time, he was given better jobs, and the boss began to recognize him as a skilled assassin.

Land's weapon and fighting style had changed from when he was a thief, and he was really becoming a proper assassin. He used a blackjack (a baglike weapon that was filled with iron balls) to knock out his targets, and then he strangled them with his rope. Sometimes, he used poison like Misty.

When Land had gotten used to numbing himself to his emotions, his life as an assassin wasn't bad. His commission was good, he had a happy life, and Land had one single wish—maybe he had made it this far because he was able to cling to that wish.

After two years had passed, Land took Misty outside one day and confessed his secret to her.

"I'm going to Corbenia for my next job."

"That's amazing! The boss really must trust you. It's been only two years, and he's already giving you work so far away. I hear Corbenia's a big port city."

"Yeah, apparently . . . I was thinking, maybe I could sneak onto some ship and get smuggled away. Surely even the guild wouldn't be able to get to me then?"

Misty opened her eyes wide. In a quiet whisper, she said, "I can't believe you. You still haven't given up?"

"Of course not. I can't live like this," replied Land, also in a whisper.

"I've been waiting for this day. That's why I've followed everything the boss had to say to the letter. I've done it to buy his trust."

Misty sighed. "Fine. Then, you should do as you please. Goodbye!"

She was angry. Land grabbed hold of her arm as she tried to leave. "No, I mean, of course I want you to come with me. Let's run away together."

Misty stared at him in silence shock.

"Apparently, there's a big country called Ronza on that continent. I'm planning to make my way there as a thief. I'm not going to be any ordinary thief, though, I'm going to be an adventurer and find treasure! It'd be difficult alone, so I'll probably join a thief group—and you'll be the mistress of the group. Even ruffians would listen carefully to what you had to say."

Misty looked back at Land with dark eyes. *What are you doing, thinking silly thoughts like this?* she thought. *You'll only get sad. We're not allowed to dream. We don't have a right to dream after being in the business of killing people.*

These words rose to the top of her throat—but in the end, Misty said nothing. She simply left Land standing there, never to return to his arms.

Land only found out her change of heart two days later. The next day, Misty was absent from the guild because of a job, so Land wasn't worried. He was convinced that she would surely change her mind, despite the doubt she'd expressed. Believing this, Land prepared for their getaway. He also got together the money to ride on a ship at Corbenia.

However, the next day, when Land returned from being out, he realized something odd was going on inside the guild. It seemed like everyone wanted to say something to Land but wouldn't . . . at least, that was how it felt.

Hmm? What is it? he wondered

Then, when he returned to his room, he heard it: Misty and another man, laughing as they came out of her room.

It's that guy, Anthony.

Anthony's results were poor when compared to the other assassins. He was a soft touch who was always getting yelled at by the boss because of slip-ups. He was kind like a woman, and he had an elegant face like a nobleman—that was all he was good for. He would be assigned to work with other assassins, like Tony. Anthony would distract the target or others while Tony would do the job. That was why, until now, an intelligent girl like Misty would never give Anthony the time of day.

Both Misty and Anthony looked at Land, pausing for a while before continuing on their way downstairs, laughing all the while.

When Land called out to her in a sharp voice, Misty glanced back at Land. "What? What do you want? I'm sorry, but we're on our way out. Spit it out if there's something you want."

"Why are you speaking to me that way? And who's this guy?"

As Land approached them, Misty looked up at Anthony and snickered. "What can I say?"

Land kicked the old table beside his bed and shouted, "So, this is how it is?"

Misty, without changing her expression, replied, "How what is? I don't belong to you. I can go out with whomever I like. It's my business." There wasn't a hint of that sweet nature that had been present during their honeymoon period.

Land was absolutely enraged. "Fine. Go away then! Go away!"

After they had left, he started to kick the chairs and pillars around him. And then, he brought out something from his trouser pocket, squeezing it tight until his fist turned white. It was a silver ring with a small red stone on it, which he'd just bought that day. He bought it to give to her on the boat, for when they'd finally managed to run away.

Just at the moment he was about to throw the ring with all his might, the servant woman, Garcina, came to stand at the door. She had expected him to react this way, so she'd come up to see how he was doing. She was short and stout, and as she rubbed her hands, which were rough from all the work she did with water, she said, "Land, don't be angry at Misty. When she's going out with someone special, she gets really insecure. Poor thing—she gave up hope long ago about getting married and having children."

Land looked at Garcina with bloodshot eyes, giving her the ring. "You can have this."

"Land . . ."

It was probably true, what Garcina said. It was because I started talking about the future. She probably doesn't like me anymore. Maybe she thought that I was being difficult. Whatever she says, she likes her life now. And the boss likes her, too. No, she's already become unable to leave this place. To her, this lifestyle . . . this world has become a part of her. My plan would be nothing but an inconvenience for her.

Land felt ridiculous. If presented with the worst-case scenario, he would've been willing to die for her, for a chance to be together with her. But that was just a self-centered thought.

Land's shoulders dropped, and he sat down on the spot.

CHAPTER 6



In the end, the job that would've taken him to Corbenia was given to another assassin, because Land was devastated and wasn't dealing well with things at all. Even the other assassins started to warn him to look after his own body.

"Pah, if you guys are warning me, I must really be in the dumps," he replied as he drowned himself in alcohol and tottered about laughing. Although he did the jobs he was assigned, he spent most of his commission money on booze and gambling. He himself knew that it was an avoidance tactic—but if he didn't drown his sorrows, he couldn't even bear being alive. And as usual, he found it difficult to sleep at night. If he didn't drink himself unconscious, he would have the worst nightmares.

However, Land also knew that this couldn't go on. *I've gotta do something—but what? What can I possibly do?* he wondered to himself pointlessly.

He'd managed all this time because he'd held onto the dream of running away from this hell with Misty. Now that his only wish had been taken away . . .

Every time he looked at the dirty mirror on the wall in his room, he felt miserable. He couldn't stop hating himself. During the day, he slept like a dog in his dirty bed—and when he finally awoke, the sun was setting, so he started his day with a drink. When he wasn't working, he would go straight to the dark dank bar and gamble, casually sleeping with girls and generally wreaking havoc until the early morning.

"Hey, that's enough." The boss, who didn't usually interfere with the assassins' behavior, had even started lecturing him.

After a while, his debts from gambling started to add up. When this started to impinge on his drinking habits, Land began to see the end.

One night, when he was loafing around the guild with nothing to do, the boss brought him a job. "Hey, Land, why don't you get a change of atmosphere?"

There were two targets. One was an adventurer called Samuel Mid. His occupation was a ranger, but he was now working as an adventurer, making his way as a mercenary. He was only a level 6, and as Land was a level 10 in his adventuring days, Samuel wasn't going to be a problem for him. The more troublesome of the two was the other target.

"Hey, hey, this level six guy, Samuel, is fine, but what's up with this Clay Judah Anderson? Adventuring level sixteen? And he's only twenty-four . . . He's only one year apart from me—how the heck did he get to sixteen?"

While receiving direct instructions from the client, an elegant-looking servant who worked for some palace somewhere, Land started moaning about the job without a thought.

He was being asked to assassinate two messengers who were heading to Orland before they reached their destination. One was delivering a secret message to the King of Orland, the other was delivering a message to a minister called Schneider. "Ensure that you retrieve these secret documents from them and deliver those," he was told, "along with one ear from each."

Land knew immediately what it was about. *I bet the King of Ganau is planning to stir up the already-troubled relationship between the King of Orland and that minister with those secret messages; then, he plans to charge in when the nation is in turmoil. So, this assassination is meant to stop that before it happens. That means this client must be someone who works for the political fixer of Orland—and the political fixer of Orland is that famous dude, the ex-King Liesbeck. I get it.*

He calculated all this himself as he assessed his own situation. *Dang, he's scheming quite a kickback.*

Land clicked his tongue inside his head. Because it related to something on a national scale, the commission on this would probably be generous. But the price the boss had quoted Land was not on a par with that—in fact, it was lower than his ordinary rate. Land, however, had debts from drinking and gambling that were quickly adding up, and he wasn't in a position to refuse the job.

That scheming son of a . . .

He clicked his tongue again. Then, without even looking at the client, he started to hatch his plan. *Ideally, I'd like to do one of them in before they even leave Ganau. In that case, I'd have to go for the lower-level guy, Samuel. I'll do him first. And then, I'll take care of that monster at level 16—but how?*

For one moment, he thought about asking someone to help out—but then, he quickly brushed that idea aside. *I can't do anything as pathetic as that. Besides, the boss assigned this job to me alone. Fine! I can do this!*

CHAPTER 7



However, in the end, it didn't work out as Land had planned. He got rid of Samuel easily enough, but the other man, the level 16 fighter, Clay Judah Anderson . . . that one, Land hadn't managed to kill.

In the deep forest that separates Orland and Ganau, during a storm with raging lightning and rain, Land attacked Clay Judah from behind—but he himself was instead struck, and he was wounded quite badly in the shoulder. If he had been left there in the forest, he would've died a long time ago. However, to his surprise, his target, Clay Judah, nursed him back to health. Land revealed his identity to Clay Judah, also enlightening him about the contents of the secret document that Clay Judah was holding. Land explained that the message was for the King of Orland, and that it detailed the rebellion that the minister Schneider was plotting against him. Land also went on to tell Clay Judah that the document told the king to kill the messenger who bore it as soon as possible.

He even explained that the secret document the other messenger held was addressed to the minister Schneider, and it alluded to the king's plot to overthrow Schneider. Of course, this one also instructed the recipient to kill the messenger.

It doesn't matter what happens now, Land thought half-heartedly. He had been after Clay Judah's life, and yet this man was nursing him back to health. He wanted to be of use to this man who was so softhearted, and that's why he told him that he'd be killed if he were to deliver the message as intended.

But the man didn't heed his warning. He didn't even peek at the message.

"I've taken your warning to heart, and I'm grateful. But I was requested to take this to the King of Orland, and I was told not to look inside. I intend to keep my promise."

The man had clear, defenseless eyes. Land decided he was a stupid idiot; he'd thought at first that he was an honest, good guy, but now he'd decided Clay Judah was actually just stupid. At the same time, Land felt drawn to him. And then, the desire to escape his wretched miserable life started to rise up again.

It didn't matter if the Assassin Guild chased him around or even if he became a target himself—maybe Clay Judah could save him. He didn't know why, but he chose to believe in him. Land had seen hell at close-hand for two years; he never wanted to return to that hell, even if it meant that death would be waiting for him on the outside.

When Land awoke from his long reminiscence, he noticed that he was clenching his fists so tightly that they'd turned white. He uncurled them slowly and took a long hard look at them. Even though he was forced into it, it was still undeniable that he had murdered so many with those hands.

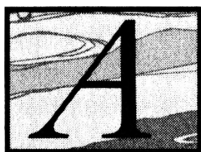
I see . . . The reason why I'm so attached to Clay Judah isn't just because of self-protection. Well, there's that, as well, of course—I mean, it was a sneaky plan I wanted to pull off, and he's a level 16 . . . But he could save me in the real sense of the word. He could purify my sins for me. And I felt that he could . . . That's why.

Laughter rose up from deep inside Land's stomach. How optimistic! You're so selfish, Land.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He appeared so wretched and miserable to himself that he could hardly bear it. But he still wanted to live.

I am so uncool!

CHAPTER 8



Another week passed, and it had been about half a month since Duan and the others left. Land's wound was healing well, and Olba had started thinking about his next quest as he held a beer in one hand and rooted through his own things.

"Hey, stay here just a little while longer," Land begged seriously.

In my emotional state, if I were left here in the castle on my own . . . Even thinking about it makes me nervous. The reason I've managed so far is because of Olba.

But Olba raised his eyebrows and said, "Pah, no way. I ain't your nurse. And anyway, your wound seems much better now."

"N-no way. I can't sleep at night because it hurts so much."

"Moron. The only reason you can't sleep is because you're up all night partying."

It was true. Even Olba couldn't keep up with him, and he left Land and went to bed by himself many nights. That was how hard Land was partying.

"Um, how about this one? A level ten to thirteen dungeon. No undead monsters, and the map isn't so complicated, so it says you can challenge it on your own. . . . It's in a place called Largo. Where is that? It says it's nearby. Do you know it?" Olba asked—but Land quickly turned to his side. Seeing this, Olba laughed. "You're like a kid."

"I don't have a wife and kids like you do!"

When he heard those words, Olba spat out his beer. "W-w-what? What's that? Who told you?"

With mischief in his eyes, Land laughed. "So, I'm not wrong then."

"You're bluffing!"

"Nah. The women who you've infatuated were gossiping, saying you had the smell of a man who has a wife and kids."

"And what's the smell of a man who has a wife and kids? Stupid."

Land laughed again. "So? If you're not saying 'no,' it must be right. Where'd you leave them behind while you went adventuring?" Land asked, filled with curiosity.

But Olba replied with a straight face, "It's none of your business. And if you're well enough to argue with me, you're fine. I'm leaving tomorrow."

There was a knock at the door just as Land was drawing his breath to yell, "What?"

The Black Knight Sven Giesen appeared, and he paced toward Land as he said, "Land, good news! Rejoice!"

Sven grinned at the wide-eyed Land. "The deal is done. The boss of the Assassin Guild has agreed."

For one moment, the inside of Land's head went completely blank. When you wish for something so much and it actually happens, you can't always grasp it as reality.

Olba and Sven laughed at Land, who was awestruck.

That night, there was a grand party, attended by Olba, Sven, Land, and the youngest of the Black Knights, along with the women of the castle. The location was a spacious room near the barracks, a little removed from where the royalty were located. The Black Knights wore a rough outfit of white shirts and brown suits, and the women stood close to them, chatting happily.

One of them coaxed Olba to show her the scenario he'd selected. "Wow. So, this is an adventure scenario?"

"Yeah. Why, haven't you seen one before?"

"Of course not. I'm not an adventurer." The woman with blonde curly hair laughed. "It'll be lonely once you leave. Come and visit again soon?"

"Yeah, I'll come and visit when I pass through here."

"Fantastic! Don't forget."

The woman was clinging to Olba's neck firmly when Land came interfering.

"Hey, are you really leaving tomorrow? Can you come back as soon as you finish? How long will it take you?"

"God, you're a bad drunk. You're on a par with Check."

"Huh? Check? The pet that kid Duan keeps?"

"Hey, he's not just a pet. He can cast Heal Magic."

"Hmph. So, he's Duan's partner. They suit each other."

"Ha ha! I suppose you're right." Olba started to laugh because he had pictured Duan exploring a dungeon with a life-sized Check.

"What? What's so funny?" Land was trying to pick a fight again.

Land quickly finished the drink he was holding, slamming the cup back down onto the table. A slender woman approached and poured more alcohol into the cup, which Land carelessly lifted. He was about to down it when Olba slapped the cup out of his hand.

“Argh! What the heck are you doing?”

Shards of the cup smashed across the floor. The women screamed and everyone grew confused—but Olba wasn’t explaining anything. Instead, he dashed off with intent, running after the woman who was trying to sneak away in the mayhem.

The woman was wearing a darkish veil made of soft cloth, which covered her head completely. She clutched it with her hand to hide her face as she made her way between the people gathered there with incredible speed.

Seeing her retreating figure, Land opened his eyes wide. “Misty?”

Upon hearing his voice, it seemed that the elegant lines of her back froze for an instant. Without losing that chance, Olba grabbed hold of the woman’s slender wrist with his big hand.

Her veil floated off and drifted to the ground. And then, as if to replace the lost veil, her shiny black long hair billowed out. She seemed to surrender with a small shrug, correcting her posture as she turned around.

Olba and everyone else in the castle gulped—that was how overwhelmingly beautiful she was.

CHAPTER 9



and, Olba, Sven, and Misty were the only ones left in the room, and the sole sound was the wood crackling in the fireplace.

Olba, who had been watching the silent Land, finally spoke. "It was because I hadn't seen her before. I thought there was something funny at the start. And then, she brought out booze from her bosom and came directly to you to pour you a drink without pouring anyone else a drink first. Actually, she did pretend to pour drinks for others, but she was faking. That's why I knew something was up."

Land suddenly started to laugh. "Yeah, there's no way you could leave the guild so easily. Of course . . ."

He continued to laugh vigorously, his chest heaving upward and downward, and his shoulders trembling. Then, he collapsed into the black shiny leather sofa. It wasn't funny at all, and his was the sort of laughter that would choke its listeners. Both Olba and Sven looked at him with pain.

Misty stood in the middle of the room, gazing at one spot on the floor with a white face. Her crimson lips remained tightly shut.

And then, as unexpectedly as he had started laughing, Land suddenly stopped. He whispered seriously, "Yeah, but Misty . . . I can't believe he ordered you to . . ."

Land thought a little about this, the meaning behind sending the love of his life to assassinate him. The boss of the Assassin Guild was saying that he would never forgive Land, no matter what happened. And at the same time, he was probably testing Misty's loyalty. After all, she could have reunited with Land and decided to run away with him—or they both could've asked for protection from the ex-King Liesbeck. If that had been the case, even the boss wouldn't have been able to interfere easily. No, the boss was asking Misty, "What's your move?"

The boss was making a gamble, seeing which way she was going to fall. What confidence! And we're talking about the ex-King Liesbeck here, yet he hasn't given anything away, and he isn't even scared.

Land realized the power of the boss once again, and he was so scared that his body started to tremble.

If Misty returned to the guild now, saying that she failed, what would he do? There would be no way she'd be safe.

"Oh!" Land yelled without thinking. And then, surprised at his own voice, he quickly covered his mouth with his hands.

I get it! He won't accept failure. He knows I won't leave Misty out on a limb. The boss knows how much I love her. Friggin' heck. Is he telling me to come back to the guild with Misty? Is he saying that then he'll decide how to deal with me?

"What should we do? Shall I report this back to Sir Liesbeck?" Sven Giesen asked Land.



Land looked up quickly.

"I'm sure that it will all be resolved quickly if you discuss this with Sir Liesbeck," Sven continued.

But Land was shaking his head. "N-no, no, no. If that's the case, then she'll become targeted by the guild, as well."

"But Sir Liesbeck said that the deal was closed with the guild. That means the guild broke their promise. Surely, he can mount a formal objection to this?"

This time, Olba addressed Sven. "Formal objection? Um, we're talking about an assassin guild here—have you lost touch with reality working as a knight?"

Sven's expression showed that he realized his mistake, and he let out a big sigh.

It was at that moment that the previously silent Misty chose to speak. "Land, he just can't forgive you."

Land glanced at Misty's face and replied, "Yeah, I know."

Misty walked toward Sven, stopping in front of him. She raised her face up to look at him, and then she thrust both her hands out. "Go ahead. I don't mind if you take me to that 'sir' of yours—or the prison, or the gallows. I've resolved myself to it, ever since it was decided that I was to come here," she said in a hoarse voice, as though she were singing.

Sven, looking troubled, glanced at Land and Olba alternately.

Even Olba couldn't think of an answer. The assassin boss was probably intent on ignoring any agreement made with the ex-king—although it was unlikely that royalty would take the promise of a layman seriously. There was no trust there in the first place.

There was probably nothing much more that the ex-King Liesbeck could have done. At most, he could offer them guards

and promise them protection, but that would be like a soft prison for them. And then, they'd still be spending chilling days wondering whether there was poison in their food.

"This is difficult . . ." commented Olba. Sven, who was next to him, made a deep sigh.

Silence fell over the room once again. The atmosphere seeping in was tense and awkward—so much so that one would hesitate even to clear one's throat.

Quite suddenly, the door opened and a chubby, middle-aged man came tumbling in. Both Misty and Land yelled when they saw his face.

"Tony! What the heck are you doing here!" screamed Land as he rushed toward the man. Land's hair bristled like a bush from the corners of his sweaty shiny forehead, but his eyes had love in them: They saw his friend Tony, one of the assassins.

Panting as he gazed at Land and Misty, Tony said, "Good, I got here in time."

"What are you doing here? I get it. You're here to help Misty—the boss sent you just in case she failed. To kill me," Land supposed.

But Tony shook his head forcefully. "No, you're wrong. Don't jump to conclusions, just listen to my story," he replied, but then he looked at Olba's and Sven's faces and tilted his head to one side.

Seeing this, Land put his hand on Tony's shoulder and got the assassin to sit down on the large black leather sofa where he himself had been sitting.

"It's fine. They're my friends. Just sit down and relax. Want some wine?"

Tony licked his lips and gulped down the red wine that had a blackish tinge to it. He let out a breathy, smelly sigh afterward, and then once again turned his attention to Land.

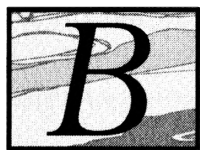
“Um, Land, the boss wants to make a deal with you—well, seeing that Misty failed. If she hadn’t, and you’d died, then you wouldn’t be around, deal or no deal.” Anthony laughed.

A deal? The boss wants to make a deal with me? I guess even the boss can’t go up against the ex-king of a whole country.

Land, glaring at the red-faced Tony. “Enough of the chit-chat. What’s this deal?”

Tony’s expression became serious. He brought his thin eyebrows together and wrinkled his brow as he said, “He wants you to take Bloody Law.”

CHAPTER 10



Both Misty and Land were dumbfounded by those words, because they were totally unexpected. Land regretted having let his imagination drift to sweet dreams for a moment when he'd heard the word "deal."

Bloody Law . . . There wasn't a single assassin who didn't start shaking when he heard that name. Of course, this was so even before Land had been sold to the Assassin Guild. There was a time when assassins from different regions were being suddenly and brutally murdered. A guild was always at the center of the slaying; they'd find a few bodies that had been dismembered and strung up with a note pinned to the chests stating, "This person is a murderer," and then the guild would be burnt down. Because all the people who were getting killed were assassins, though, no one else in the world was distressed about the killings; there were even those who praised the killer as a hero. That was how detested Assassin Guilds were by the world.

And the man who started to exterminate every last one of them as though they were lice, burning them up one by one, was Bloody Law, also known as the Assassin Killer.

There were rumors that his face had been horribly scarred from a bad burn and that all his fingertips had been replaced with sharp, retractable knives. And according to legend, he was actually a superior knife-throwing expert, as well.

He was apparently about thirty years old. He was tall, and his arms and legs were long, like a spider's. It was rumored that he had been raised a nobleman's son. He was supposedly generous and very kind and gentlemanly—to everyone apart from assassins.

But all that was vague hearsay, and certainly nothing reliable.

Even when Land had been at the Assassin Guild, the Assassin Killer stories would come up from time to time. But there was no talk of his appearance nearby, so the members listened to the stories as if they'd come from a country far away.

According to Tony, the boss had received information that Bloody Law had finally made his way to their neighborhood, and that another Assassin Guild already had been eliminated.

Land knew about the other guild already. The boss of the other guild was an old acquaintance with their boss, and he looked like a tubby heir from a good home. Nobody would have guessed from his air of peace that he was the boss of an Assassin Guild.

And yet, early one morning, he was strung up in front of his burning mansion. On his chest was the usual paper, reading, "This person is a murderer." All the other assassins of his guild also had been murdered.

Apparently, Land's and Misty's boss had just received a letter from that other boss, saying, "There's something shady coming our way. Instead of getting done in ourselves, why don't we join forces and get rid of him?"

So, the deal that the boss had proposed to Land. . . .

"Kill Bloody Law—if you can get rid of him once and for all, then I'll make it your last job at the guild?" Land asked, "Was it something like that?"

Tony laughed bitterly. "You know him well. That's it then—get in touch when you've decided. We've assembled some information on our end, too. I'll return home first with Misty. Don't think you'll be able to run away. If you run, Misty will lose her life. That's how tough our boss is."

Land gazed back at Tony with vacant eyes. And then, he turned to Misty. She looked back at Land with a grim expression.

"Fine. I'll do it. I know exactly how painful the boss' vengeance can be. Tell him I'll do it. I'll head back once I get some things done here," said Land, to which Tony replied with a satisfied nod.

"In the end, the boss is really just buying you off. If he wasn't, he would never do a deal like this. You would have been dead meat a long time ago."

"Yeah, that might be true," answered Land.

Then, taking Misty with him, Tony left the room with a quick goodbye.

Land called out to Misty's back. "Misty, don't ever be alone. If you're still going out with that guy Anthony, never leave his side. Just never be alone."

Misty paused for a moment, but she left the room without even looking back at him.

Sven, who was watching them, suddenly thought about how they were able to come and go as they pleased in the castle.

Well, they're professionals. I'm sure they have their ways. . . . I wonder what kind of man Bloody Law is—the man even they are so afraid of.

He was intrigued, although he'd only heard a little about him.

But if that dangerous a man is wandering around these parts . . . and furthermore, if Land hasn't been expelled from the Assassin Guild . . . and if that guy finds out that he is here . . . then, it's imperative that we increase the guards around the castle, thought Sven.

To the others, he said, "Well, I must return to my guard. Land, I would like to help but . . . in my position, it would be difficult. I truly am sorry."

"No, it's fine. I'm sure Olba here will help me," answered Land.

Olba, whose eyes had been half-closed until then, nearly dropped his cigarette from his mouth.

Sven, who was watching this, laughed lightly, but then he hardened his expression and said to Land, "Land, it would be dangerous to attract that man to this castle. . . ."

"I know. I'll leave as soon as I can. So, Olba . . ."

Olba thrust his head down into his adventuring scenario, purposefully ignoring Land.

Land dramatically clung to Olba. "Oh, come on! You're my only hope. Or what? Are you gonna desert me?"

Olba tried to shoo Land away with a fed-up expression, but Land's mouth turned into a frown, and he looked at Olba as though he was about to cry. So, Olba grinned as he said, "You'll have to pay me."

The very next moment, Land's face lit up.

"Of course. Do you know how large the bounty is that's been put on Bloody Law's head? You'll be gob-smacked when you hear it. Well, you'd be able to live a leisurely life like you're doing now for about two years, easily."



Olba rolled up and tidied away the scenario he had open and said, "Don't get me wrong."

Land waited for him to explain, and Olba looked at him with a hard expression.

"I'm not an assassin."

In that instance, Land's face hardened, too.

Olba continued, "So, I don't know what this guy is like, but I'm not gonna kill him. I can guard *you*, though. I'll come with you if you'll hire me as your bodyguard."

Land's face remained hardened for a while as he stared at Olba, but he soon grinned. "Fine. Gotcha. I'll hire you. Guard me well!"

"Good. Then, let's make a plan. What are his weapons? What does his face look like? His body? I want all the information you have."

"Yeah. Once we've sorted out our equipment and luggage, we should go back to the guild together. They'll probably have more detailed information there," Land said as he thought about his own equipment. He was too lightly equipped. His clothes and his weapons were too assassin-oriented.

I'll discuss it with Sven and the others and see if I can borrow something more suited to offensive attacks. As his thoughts wandered off like this, he suddenly got a surprising and strange feeling. Until just a moment ago, he'd felt like he was standing in the abyss of despair—but now, he was thinking about tomorrow.

He drained the wine in his glass and wiped his mouth. Looking at Olba, he thought, *That's it, Misty. We can't give up hope when we've only just begun. We do have many sins weighing us down, and we'll have to live with those. But, that being said, we still can't give up hope and continue to add to our sins. If we have one chance in a million, then I've decided I'm going to bet on it. I'll never give up.*

Around that time, a man was standing on a small hill with his back to a black forest—a forest as dark as an ink smear. With the moonlight streaming down on him, it looked as though his cheeks had been carved with a sharp knife, as if half his face was covered with a thin panel.

His long unruly hair was almost white, and it fell to his shoulders. His shoulders were broad, and although they were bony, his arms and legs were long. He was about the same height as Olba.

He was wearing a dark, figure-hugging scale armor, and a cape in a similar color. But that cape—you couldn't see it in the dark, but in broad daylight, you would see the blackish-brown stains all over it.

Upon that hill, he could see across a quiet rural landscape. It was close to the border of Orland, in the outskirts of Ganau. And dotted around in that rural landscape one could see here and there humble family farms, and one house among them.

It was highly unlikely that the neighbors, who had lived there for many, many years, would ever have known that place was an Assassin Guild hideout.

Within his finely chiseled face, his eyes were set in shadow and could not be seen. But if you had followed the direction of his gaze, then it was certain that he was looking down on that very Assassin Guild.

The man was called Bloody Law by some, Assassin Killer by others. However, not a single person knew his true identity.

CHAPTER II



Although the sun had come up a long time ago, it was being obstructed by the thick clouds, so the light was incredibly weak. On the other hand, the wind was so strong that it bent the thick trunks of the trees, which let out a horrible creaking sound.

“Hurry up! I have a really bad feeling,” said Land, turning around on top of his horse.

“Man, don’t stress. If you stress and you hurt the horses, then we’ll really be in trouble. It’s really uneven around here. I think it might have been better walking,” moaned Olba, straddling the warhorse that he’d just received from the King of Orland as a reward. Inside, Olba was thinking that if he wasn’t careful, they would end up having to leave their horses behind.

That was how much the road inside the forest had fallen into ruin because of the earlier storm. Yes, Land had used this road when he was still an assassin, and when he’d been following Clay Judah, who’d been carrying the secret documents.

Even though it had been many days since then, it seemed that nobody had cleared the path yet. The large trees that had been struck down by lightning were still on the ground, and the branches that had been swirled up by the rain and wind were still piled high.

Land and Olba had both traveled by horse before. So, unlike Duan and Agnis, they needed no training, and they controlled their horses freely, as though they had ridden them for ages. The horses were excellent, too, and they listened well to what they were told. Even so, with this road and also this weather to contend with, Land was becoming more and more stressed, and they couldn't push forward as they wished.

Thanks to the arrangement of the King of Orland, the duo was well equipped. But saying that, Olba's equipment hadn't changed much—he wore part armor on top of a black chain mail and boots with knee guards, along with a black cape he had bought while with Duan, and a well used longsword and a sharp dagger.

Nothing had changed on his exterior, but everything he was wearing underneath—his clothes and his undergarments—was new.

On the other hand, things were different for Land. He'd only brought clothes for his original journey, so he'd chosen the lightest armor there was and some boots that would be good for sneaking around. He also selected the cape he had on. He couldn't use the rope from his assassin days, so he picked a small short sword and a slingshot instead. Those were his weapons of choice from his adventuring days.

Finally, they came to a point where they could advance no farther: A large tree was obstructing the way.

When he saw the large tree, Land hung his head, remembering that he had attacked Clay Judah from behind

when the messenger had been climbing over this tree. He also remembered how Clay Judah immediately retaliated, and how Land was the one who was fatally wounded.

Olba got down from his horse and said to the frozen Land, "Hey, wait a sec." He was thinking that if the ground was even ahead of the tree, they'd have the option of getting the horses to jump over. *Normal horses would falter and wouldn't even get near it, but these are warhorses, trained by the Black Knights. I'm sure they could do it.*

He placed a hand on a thick tree and jumped on top. Then, he hopped down on the ground and said to Land, "I'm confident that I can jump it. How 'bout you?"

"Hmph, I'm fine—you don't have to worry about me," Land answered after finally snapping out of it.

Olba nodded satisfactorily. "All right then, we don't have a problem. You go first."

"Why me?" cried Land as he blew his cheeks out.

"Is there a problem?" laughed Olba, straddling his horse.

At those words, Land made a surprised face and yelled, "Nah!"

In the next moment, he was making his horse canter with a "hi-yo!" and a quick single kick to its belly. The horse started with a trot and then entered into a gallop with good speed, aiming for the trunk of the large tree. The horse that Land was riding was not as superior as Olba's horse, but it was a horse that liked to jump, so it soon understood what its master was trying to do—and instead of faltering, it charged ahead with joy. And then, it made a magnificent jump, not even catching its hind hooves on the trunk. (It helped that Land was slim.)

"Hmph, not bad," Olba said, impressed.

"I told you," replied Land with his chest puffed up.

"No, I was impressed with the horse, not you."

"W-what?" stuttered Land, but Olba was already off, and the dark brown body of his horse passed in front of him mid-air, landing nimbly on the ground.

Olba looked at Land with a proud face.

Land replied very cynically, "Phew. That horse is certainly fit for a gift from a king."

"Hmph. Let's get a move on. Weren't you getting worried?" asked Olba, and Land's face hardened. When he was with Olba, he felt his tension melt away somehow, but it was a race against time now. There was indeed no time for chatter.

If I were here alone . . . Man, that would have been scary. With my nerves and this blinding fear, I would've been totally immobile. I would have been so nervous that I might not have been able to make it over that large tree, resulting in a clumsy fall.

CHAPTER 12



es, Land was beset with a blinding fear as his thoughts of the man whose alias was Assassin Killer became more and more frequent.

I don't know what his face looks like. I don't know what his body looks like.

The one thing true of all assassins was that it was surprising they were assassins at all, making anyone declare, "Not them!" It was true for Misty, for Tony, and even for Misty's new boyfriend, the playboy Anthony. No one would possibly suspect any one of them of being a murderer. Assassins can pretend to be people whose presence you could relax in, and who could be trusted.

Then, what kind of face does this man have who is going around killing assassins? Maybe he's just like us—a man with no unusual features, an ordinary man. Maybe he looks weak and skinny.

For one second, the image of a hopeless-looking skinny man came into Land's head, but he soon brushed it aside. No, probably not. *Our opponent loathes us assassins who do that—who pretend to be*

something we're not, and then show our fangs when the time is right. I'm sure he'll look different than the rest of us. I haven't heard any stories about him using magic—that means he's a fighter.

This time, Land imagined a buff hero of justice. *Maybe someone who was close to him was killed and that was what triggered his righteous indignation. Is there a imposing longsword gripped in his hand?*

Assassins are skilled at killing people in their sleep, in their moments of weakness, but they're weak when it comes to face-to-face combat. If he's a skilled swordsman or a master of martial arts, then I really won't stand a chance.

He imagined quite easily the many assassins who had been brutally slaughtered. *According to Tony, everyone had been preparing diligently, so they must have been ready to cope with him somewhat. It isn't as if they were caught off guard. Yet they all were exterminated swiftly, as easily as harming a defenseless baby. Why? He's only one man.*

As he thought about this and that and let his imagination wander, he tried to come up with a criminal profile. But his mind wouldn't calm down, and his ability to fall asleep had decreased.

Land tossed and turned, and when he finally did sleep, he would groan as though he were having terrifying nightmares. The night that Misty had come to the Silver-Gray castle and the night after that, Land hadn't sleep well. On top of that, his healing wound was aching. To be honest, Land would have wanted to depart immediately, but it would have been pointless to race off without any preparations. So, they left for the assassin guild the third morning after Misty had appeared.

Having shared a room with Land, Olba knew that he wasn't doing well. *Judging from his state, it's best not to go directly to the guild tonight. We should stay one night at an inn and rest. Although*

there's no time to spare, it's not as if they have any real evidence, judging from what happened the other day. And we're only trying to be careful because of the attack on another Assassin Guild, the one led by the boss' old friend.

Olba was thinking that they should rest at an inn—or at the least, they should go to a bar to get a light meal so that they could sift through all the information they had.

“Olba, let's speed up. At this rate, we won't get there until evening!” shouted Land in an impatient voice.

Olba called out from behind, “Oh, that. I was thinking—wouldn't it be better to stay a night at an inn near here?”

“What the heck? We don't have the time! We need to get to the guild as soon as possible and find out how things are!”

“Hmph. Okay.” He had guessed that Land would say as much.

“I understand. Let's go to the Assassin Guild first and collate our information. And if they say it isn't going to be today or tomorrow, we should get some decent sleep at an inn. You definitely won't be able to rest at the guild, will you?”

Land knew that Olba was spot-on. It was true: There was that Assassin Killer business, but there was also the possibility that it was all a trap. Misty had come to kill him, and that was a fact. Maybe this Assassin Killer story was a ruse in order to take steps to punish Land for wanting to leave the guild. There would be no chance he'd be dozing there, just as Olba was saying.

“Okay. As it's what my bodyguard wants, I'll give it some thought.” Land laughed a little and then made his horse gallop.

Olba followed after him, gazing up at the sky, which was looking darker and more dreadful. Small raindrops had started to beat down with the violent raging winds.

CHAPTER 13



In the end, when they finally arrived at the Assassin Guild, it was long past sunset. Luckily, the rain was still light, although the grass that was growing on the sides of the road was drenched in water.

Because the strong winds had blown and drifted away some of the clouds, there was a gap in the clouds like a hole where the stars could be seen sparkling. At this rate, the rain might be stopping soon.

The duo tied their horses to the fence outside and looked up at the eerily quiet guild, a two-story building that looked like a farmhouse. To the back, there was one shack, where they would discuss the essentials of the case with clients, down to the smallest detail. Yes, this was the hut where, under the orders of the ex-King of Orland Liesbeck, the man named Pikra had negotiated with the boss. The headquarters were the two-story house itself.

"The entrance is this way," Land instructed in a low voice, and then he walked down a small path with an old wooden fence on either side.

Olba followed behind him silently, but he'd been having a terrible feeling for a while. *Something is wrong.* He also felt that he was being watched.

As Olba walked along with an extremely sharpened sensitivity, he caught a glimpse of a part of what might be causing his uneasiness.

"Hey, Land. Look at this."

Land, who had hurried on ahead, looked back with a very pale face.

Olba thrust his chin and pointed out the crumbling old wooden fence: One bit of the blackened fence had been broken, showing fresh wood inside. In fact, now that they took proper notice, they saw that it wasn't just one place that had been broken. A bit of the fence just by Land was freshly broken, too. It looked as though something had crashed into it with great force.

Did someone leave in a big hurry? Land bit his lip and turned around without a word. He started to run.

Olba ran after him and shouted, "Land! Calm down."

But Land, making his long, red hair dance, dashed off with intense concentration.

Shoot. He can't hear me anymore. Olba ran after him desperately, but quickly glanced up at the upstairs window, where he was sure someone was looking. It was only the black curtains on the window quivering, though.

Olba quickly returned to his senses and searched for Land with his eyes. He was nowhere to be seen, though. Instead, all Olba could see was a door that had been left half open. Olba drew out his longsword and, holding it downward, he started



to walk. As he walked, he hoped that his bad feelings were unfounded.

Inside the guild, it was pitch dark.

"Olba, be careful. There was a trap on the entrance." Land's voice came from right beside him. At the same time, a single lantern shone on Land's gaunt face.

"Trap? What do you mean? Does that mean Bloody Law already has been here?" asked Olba.

Land shook his head from side to side. "No, it was the guys from the assassin guild who set the trap. They specialize in traps. It was probably because they were preparing for Bloody Law's arrival."

"So, where are the guys from the guild?"

"Dunno. It doesn't seem like they're here. I can't sense anyone's presence. But the trap had already been set off."

Olba shivered at Land's comment. "It was set off?"

"Yeah. It was a simple trap, rigged to shoot a poison arrow, which has already been shot."

"And where is that poison arrow now?"

"Dunno. Someone may have carried it off—n-no!"

Land's eyes shone. He walked straight to the pillar next to where Olba was standing and pointed at one spot with a stern expression. There was a small arrow stuck there.

"Th-that's it?" asked Olba, as though he were looking at something disgusting. Land nodded.

"That means the trap was activated, but he was able to avoid the arrow. So, our opponent is very quick-witted."

"I see. I guess finding the members of the guild is our top priority then."

"I don't like the fact that there's no noise."

"Well, what should we do? Check out the first floor to start? To be honest, I had a feeling earlier that someone was

watching us from the second floor. Where are the stairs to the second floor?"

Land raised his eyebrows sharply and looked up at Olba. "There's someone on the second floor?"

"I'm not certain."

"Let's go this way, it connects to the room with the stairs," Land explained, and then he carefully checked the other door. The room they were in now was a small room near the entrance on the first floor. There was a small old desk and a few chairs were scattered about—but each of them was broken and had been knocked down, making it a tragic scene. On the right side, farther into the room, there was a staircase that led down. But Land didn't go there; instead, he went toward the wall on the left and checked a door there.

"No trap here," Land said.

Watching this, Olba remembered, "Oh yeah, you were a thief before you were an assassin, right?"

"Yeah," whispered Land moodily. And then, he opened a door that opened outward very carefully. It was very dark inside.

"This room is like a storage room," Land explained as he thrust in his lantern. The lantern light showed a large expansive room with dusty wooden boxes that were messily piled.

Screech! Something let out a high-pitched cry. At the same time, they could sense that something was moving around. Surprised, Land thrust the lantern toward the direction of the noise, and he was relieved immediately. "Tsk, rats."

The rats fled to the back of the room, not liking the light. But Olba brought his sword up, nonetheless, and he made Land take a step back.

"Rats are rats, but those don't look like ordinary rats."

"What?"

"I only caught a glimpse, but I'm sure they were Fear Rats."

"Fear Rats?"

"Never mind—let's just get out of here." Olba pushed the puzzled Land out, and they returned to the previous small room. He shut the door and answered afresh. "Apparently, they're named Bertramy Rats, but nobody calls them that. If you get bit, your head gets frazzled."

"Your head? What does that mean?"

"You become terrified of everything around you. And then, you start to attack everything and anything around you."

Fear Rats were about three times the size of ordinary rats—in other words, about the size of a cat. Their special characteristics were slimy, jet black skin, and also sharp fangs. The creepiest things about them, though, were their eyes. They were blood red, but they were narrow like a piece of thread—and because they were curved like bows, the rats almost looked like they were grinning at you.

"What the heck are those things doing here?"

"Who knows. If you didn't keep them as pets, then I guess you might have had a natural infestation or . . ."

Land raised his eyebrows at Olba's cliffhanger.

"I get it. I thought it was strange. However great a fighter or monk someone might be, it would be suicide to infiltrate a guild all by oneself. Secretly letting loose some Fear Rats and waiting for everyone to end up in a paranoid state before coming in to kill them all . . . Is that his strategy?" Olba asked.

Land opened his eyes wide. "N-no friggin' way! This is an Assassin Guild. They're all professional killers. If they went mad and tried to kill him as well as everyone around him, what kind of chaos do you think would result?"

"I get it. Our enemy is even more clever than that: He waits for most of the assassins to kill one another before coming in to finish off the rest."

Land could no longer bear staying still when he heard Olba's words. "We can't mess around. We have to get everyone outta here!" In truth, the only one he wanted to rescue was Misty.

Olba was about to make a sarcastic quip to that effect, but upon seeing Land's serious face, he swallowed his words. "Land, I understand how you feel, but you'll only make things worse if you rush. We know how he works now. Let's take it easy."

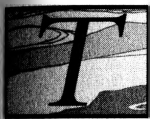
"Shut up! I know that!" he cried with a grim face.

Does he really know? Olba wondered momentarily. But then, he asked, "So, can we get to the room with the stairs if we don't use that room? In fact, I'd like to map out this house in my head—can you give me a quick summary?"

They had underestimated the amount of time they had and regretted the fact that they hadn't talked anything through properly. There was no point thinking about that now, though.

Land started to briefly explain the layout of the house.

CHAPTER 14



here was a girl, not yet five years old, standing at a loss on a back road, where the afternoon light shone softly. Next to her laid a woman—her half-opened black eyes no longer saw anything, and her cheeks with no gloss looked like white candle wax. Her hand was thrust outward—perhaps she had been trying to grab hold of something—but now it did not move.

A tall man came running over, making loud clacking noises with his feet.

“Meu, what happened?”

At the voice, the girl raised her face and opened her eyes wide. Those eyes and her hair were both messy from weeping.

“Mum’s not moving. She’s not moving.”

The man lifted the woman who was on the ground and checked all over her body. There were hardly any visible wounds, but when the man looked carefully, he noticed there was a small prick at the back of her neck, as though she’d been pricked with a pin.

It's gone purple around the wound. Was she pricked with a poison needle?

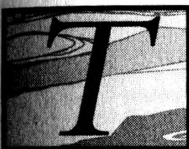
The single mother who'd worked at a diner on the outskirts of town had plump lips that were slightly parted, as though she wanted to say something. It was only yesterday that a bright, bubbly voice had come from those lips. "What's that face for? With a face like that, the feast will be ruined!" the woman had laughed. And the girl who was always close behind her had giggled, too.

The woman could have been a beauty had she been given some decent clothes—she could even have passed for a noblewoman. However, the beauty seemed to have been a hindrance to her, and she spoke roughly and had a coarse demeanor.

When she left work and held hands with her daughter, though, singing songs as she walked down the road, her retreating figure didn't have a fraction of that crudeness left. She squeezed the small hand in hers, occasionally crouching down to nestle her face against her daughter's soft cheeks.

What did this woman ever do to anyone? The man lifted up the woman who was still warm. He had no idea what to say to the girl, who looked up at him with a desperate expression. Instead, tears fell down his face. The girl grabbed the man's bony hand, and the man squeezed back.

CHAPTER 15



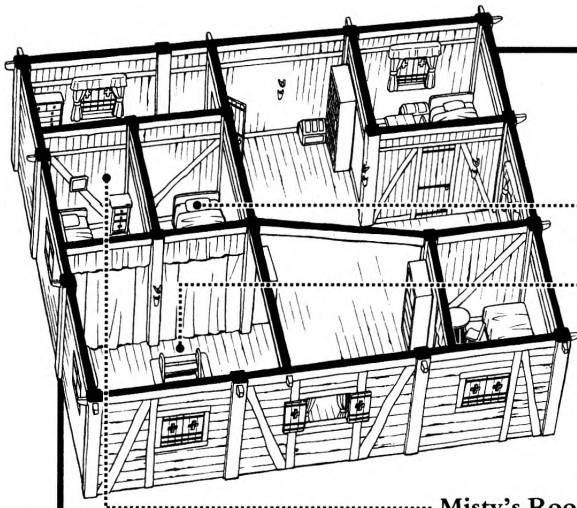
he headquarters of the Assassin Guild was twice as big as it looked from the outside, and there was a complex structure to it. There was a small entrance at the front on the first floor (where Land and Olba had come in just then), and then there was a door to the left, which led to a back room that was used just for storage of weapons or ingredients for poisons (where the Fear Rats were). From this room, the kitchen, the stables, and the dining room could be accessed. There also was a dining room to the left, with a staircase that led upstairs.

The second floor was divided into small rooms for Misty, Land, and the others.

There were two staircases inside the house, and one staircase outside. All were hidden.

In the basement, there were jail cells, as well as the room where Land had been tortured a long time ago.

"Where is the boss' room?" Olba asked.



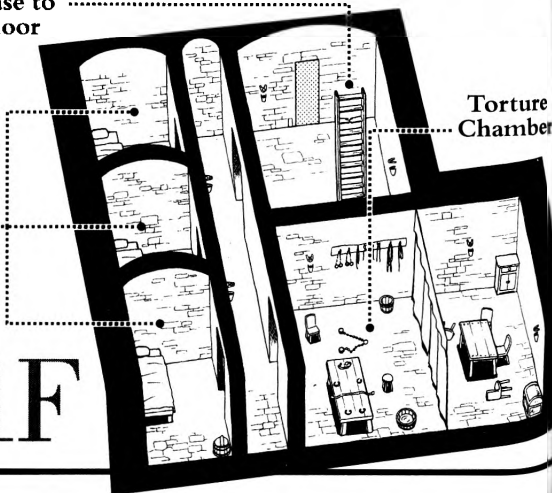
2F

Land's Room

Staircase to 1st Floor

Misty's Room

Staircase to 1st Floor



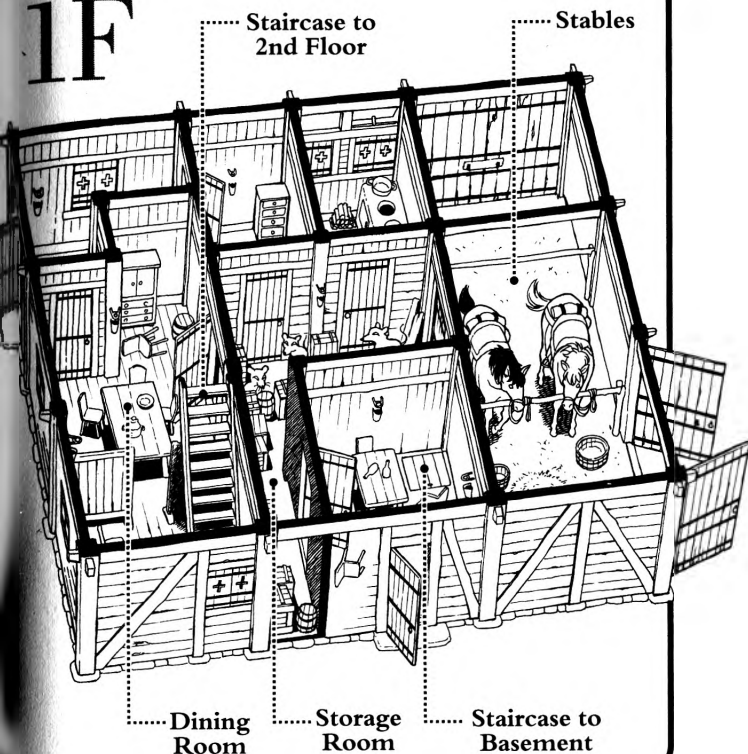
Torture Chamber

Jail Cells

B1F

A Rough Sketch of the Assassin Guild Headquarters

1F



Land tilted his head. "The room he slept in was on the second floor, like ours—but I reckon he had a different room somewhere, because I've been in the second floor room, and there's nothing in there. As a boss of an Assassin Guild, he must have had loads of lists of names and other paperwork, right?"

"I see. But he wouldn't keep those in plain sight. I think the basement room is a little suspect."

"Yeah, I think so, too. I've only ever seen the basement when I was chucked into the jail or when I was tortured, so I don't know the whole layout. You think he's a target?" Land's eyes twinkled.

Olba nodded. "Of course."

"In that case . . . Misty, who'll be close by, will be in danger, too. No—maybe he would have kept her away. He's always treated her with special attention."

"Well, she is a beauty," Olba said.

But Land shook his head fervently. "No, no, it isn't like that—not that kind of special attention. It's almost as though she was his daughter or something."

Olba made a tut-tutting noise at Land's comment. "That's ridiculous. What father would want his child to be a murderer?"

Land's eyes suddenly darkened. "Th-that's true . . ."

"Well, I know the general layout now—and the reason why he let the Fear Rats loose in the storage room."

"Yeah, it has the most impact all around. All the rooms on the first floor lead to that one."

"But the second floor and the basement are different. You can tell from the design that it's a guild. They've thought it through well."

"So, what should we do? I guess we search from the second floor?"

"Yeah, but it's difficult in this darkness. I have to be able to swing my sword about, so I can't be holding a lantern. And anyway, walking around with a lantern is like advertising where we are."

"Well, our opponent is in the same position, right?"

"Yeah, well . . . if he's a normal opponent."

"I know. Why don't we put all the lights on as we go around, instead?" Land suggested. He went to find the torchlights that should have been on the room's walls, but he returned with an incredulous expression on his face.

"They're all gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah. This room had at least two torchlight holders, but both the torchlights have been taken."

"I see."

As they whispered to each other in the darkness, both men suddenly heard a creak in the ceiling. Immediately, they looked at each other, and the rest of their conversation was conducted in silence.

"Over here." Land indicated with a beckoning hand gesture, and Olba exited out the door they'd just come in.

Because they couldn't go through the storage room with the Fear Rats, they were exiting the house and then re-entering through the door on the left-hand side, allowing them to enter the dining room and get to the second floor.

"Wait. Before that, let's move the horses somewhere out of the rain, so they can rest," advised Olba.

Land replied, "Okay then, this way."

They took their horses around the right of the house, where the stables were.

"Great. There's horse feed and water."

Olba and Land wiped their horses with some hay before giving them water and horse feed.

"The guild's horses aren't here," whispered Land. *What on Earth's happened?*

"Let's just get to the second floor," Olba reasoned, and they headed back out toward the left side of the house again.

"Walk right up against the wall—then, we can avoid unexpected attacks. Not perfect, but it helps," whispered Olba right into Land's ear.

Land nodded.

It was getting more and more windy outside.

CHAPTER 16



hey ascended the stairs to the second floor. The stairs, which were badly made and built out of old wood, might as well have been called a ladder.

With a big man like Olba on them, they creaked and strained with each step.

The agile Land, however, went up swiftly to the second floor. *There doesn't seem to be anyone here. Where have all those guys from the guild gone?*

The room right in front of the staircase was where Land had slept. When he took one step forward to try to enter the room, he almost tripped on something.

"Whoa, that was dangerous," he said without thinking, and then he quickly shut his mouth—although he would have liked to have screamed, because what he had tripped over was a body. He shone his lantern on the wide-shouldered man, who was wearing brown clothes and held a long, curved knife in his hand. The blade of the knife sparkled in the light of the lantern.

"What's up?" Olba whispered as he returned from looking at the other rooms. When he spotted the same thing Land had, he stopped.

The knife was covered in blood. The man was an assassin named Dave Warren. His specialty was secretly hiding a knife in his jacket, and then killing his opponent in a flash.

His expression was contorted in agony—or rather, it was set in terror and shock.

"Hey, over here," Olba whispered, tapping Land on the shoulder to draw his attention ahead, where there was another person on the floor. This one was a middle-aged man in a fashionable pale green coat. Although he looked sharp and, at first glance, he looked like a rich man, he was also a respectable assassin. His name was Jones Spick.

A long wound on his fat neck could be easily seen. It must have missed his carotid, as there wasn't that much blood from the wound. The fatal wound was most likely the one in his plump stomach, which had a puddle of blood beside it. His expression also had settled into one of shock.

Land made a heavy sigh and gulped, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

Creak . . . creak . . .

They could hear footsteps coming from somewhere. There was definitely someone on the second floor. The sound seemed to come from the room on the other side of the corridor.

"Nope, no torchlight here either," Olba whispered. There was nothing there on the metal fittings, where the torchlights were usually placed.

"You should turn off that lantern. We have to get our eyes used to it. See, look—we can manage with the starlight from the window," Olba said, lifting the black curtains on the



window softly. Suddenly, his unrefined side profile was lit up in the starlight. His shadow stretched out lengthily on the wooden walls. He could see not only the stars but also the moon.

The sky is clearing! Land thought. "I'll go open all the curtains."

"Be careful."

Land nodded. Paying special attention so that he would make no sound, he nimbly went around from window to window to open the curtains.

And then, he discovered another body. This one was wearing blue clothes and was curled up like a baby. On the body's back were three sharp wounds—gruesome enough to make Land want to turn away. The clothes were torn and soaked in blood, and there was a red striped pattern on the blue.

Land recognized the clothes, and his heart started to pound. When he looked into the person's face, though, he was relieved. He'd been wrong. He'd thought the clothes belonged to Misty's new lover, Anthony, but this was Anthony's pupil, Tom Roy. He was still young and had a chubby face.

He probably didn't suffer long.

Land felt choked up. He was relieved that this dead body was only Tom Roy. If it had been Anthony, then the probability that Misty was safe would have decreased drastically, as she was probably with him. But it wasn't right that it was Tom Roy, either. Tom hadn't wanted to be an assassin—and due to their proximity in age, he'd often shared his troubles with Land. He'd been made to do things as an apprentice to Anthony, but had been excused from doing any direct work at that point, although he would have been made to eventually. A year had passed since Tim had been tricked by a loan shark and thrown into the Assassin Guild. He, like Land, had despaired daily with a clouded face, dreaming about a life of freedom outside the guild.

Land had said many a time to him, "Tom Roy, don't give up. If you give up on yourself, then who else will make your dreams come true?" He had said these things to Tom, but he was actually saying them to himself, too.

As he closed Tom Roy's half-opened eyes Land could not stop tears from welling up. He sniffed, and then he covered his own eyes with his hands.

It was at that moment that a sharp metallic noise rang out!

CHAPTER 17



He stooped instinctively. Just above his head, there were a few beams of light, the reflection of the moon on some object. The beams of light accelerated through the air.

“Argh!”

He felt a sudden pain on his ear, like a burn. Land felt faint and fell to his knees. Half his left ear had been cut. Luckily, it was still attached, but it was limp, and it swung down unnaturally. He could feel something lukewarm dripping down his neck. If he had been a second later in stooping, he would have ended up like Tom Roy.

“Olba!” he screamed, and Olba came running, his loud, thudding footsteps resounding through the corridor.

“Land, stay away.”

Clink! Clang!

There were violent sounds of metal clashing. Olba’s body swung from side to side, and a black shadow moved around him at an incredible speed, its long sharp nails extended.

The longsword was raised up high.

Crash! A chest of drawers close by crashed with a loud bang. Olba avoided it and then tried to strike again with his longsword.

However, the shadow that had kicked Olba's back was faster—it kicked the wall and ceiling in quick succession and landed neatly behind Olba. The shadow's arms and legs were long like a spider, and it was unbelievably fast.

"I won't let you get away!" Olba stepped forward and tried to follow after the shadow, but a black curtain blinded him. The man had torn the curtain from the window and threw it at Olba.

"Shoot!"

During the time he battled to get the tangled curtain off himself, the man had raced downstairs without a sound, like a true shadow.

"Land!" called Olba, and Land groaned in response.

"I'm fine. It's just my ear . . . But how about the guy?"

"He got away. And with that agility, I can't catch up with him. Then, there are the Fear Rats downstairs to contend with, as well. It's better to rethink our strategy and try again."

"Okay. At least we finally saw him," Land said as he panted breathlessly. "Well, not really saw him, but . . . at least we know what he's like now."

He was different from everything they had imagined. He was like a spider. . . .

Olba nodded. "I saw him—his face."

"Really?"

"Yeah, well not his face, but his eyes. He had unusually yellow eyes. Not really yellow, but golden. They sparkled."

"Sparkling golden eyes?"

"Yeah. Maybe he's not human, some other kind of species instead, with eyes that work in the dark."

"You're not saying he's an elf?"

"No way. If he were an elf, he wouldn't be that strong."

"Yeah. And what was his weapon?" Land asked.

Olba tilted his head. "I'm not sure. It was something like an Iron Claw."

The Iron Claw—the weapon of choice for monks.

The one Bloody Law was using was extremely strong. If he extended his arms, his metal claws were long enough to reach the floor. And he must have been skilled with technique if he was able to swing those about.

"Anyway, that wound's bad . . . Wait a second. I'll get to first aid in a minute," Olba said as he lifted up the chest of drawers that had crashed down earlier and placed it on top of the staircase Bloody Law had just disappeared down. The dresser was shaped perfectly for a lid.

"That'll prevent him or those rats from coming upstairs. And even if he moves it, it'll make a racket."

Olba patted his hands clean before returning to Land, pulling out some medicine from his waist bag to stop the bleeding from Land's ear.

"What is that? A coagulant?" Land asked.

Olba cocked his head. "Um, what was it? I dunno. I bought it ages ago. They said that it'll heal you right up, like you wouldn't believe, whatever you put it on—cuts and burns."

"W-what the heck is that? And how was it?"

"How was what?"

"D-did it heal things up like you wouldn't believe?" asked Land with a serious face.

Olba shook his head. "I dunno, you moron. I've never used it before. In fact, I'd forgotten I was even carrying it until now."

"W-what? W-w-wait a second!"

Olba held down Land, who was fluttering about, and applied this mystery medicine to his wound.

"Argh!" Land screamed an indescribably painful scream.

"Take it like a man. I'd like to wrap it with a dressing, really, but if I do that, then you won't be able to hear out of that ear—and he's quiet enough as he is, without loss of senses."

Olba pasted the sticky, smelly medicine onto Land's torn ear, and then he used a bandage to set it correctly.

"Urgh—what's in this stuff? It smells horrible—my nose is gonna fall off."

Olba ignored Land's complaining and stopped his hand. "So, whose footsteps were those that we heard earlier?"

"Those were Bloody Law's—" started Land, but then he shut his mouth.

He walked without making a sound. He made no noise even as he went down those badly built stairs. So . . . ?

"Tom Roy and Warren, do you think?" Land asked.

Olba shook his head. "It wasn't like the sound of people fighting. Just footsteps . . ."

When they heard a creak again, they looked toward the noise automatically.

The two nodded at each other with their eyes, and then they quietly stood up. Olba would go to the right, and Land would go to the left—their plan was to trap whoever was making the noise.

Creak, creak . . .

There were still sounds of footsteps.

"This way!" Land whispered. Although he wasn't as quiet as Bloody Law, the nimble Land, who had forgotten about the wound in his ear, moved at an astounding speed.

Olba ran, too, so as not to trail behind.

He wasn't alone after all! Land's body tensed up again with nerves. His heightened senses extended down to his fingertips as he approached the maker of the sound with intent. The man wasn't tall and was on the chubby side. Land quickly slipped his short sword along the man's neck it at about the same time Olba stopped in front of him.

The man drew a fearful breath as he trembled violently and rubbed his hands together. "It's L-Land, isn't it? It's me, Tony!"

Land looked at the man's face, his short sword still resting on his neck. The figure had a shiny, bald head, and distinctive curly hair growing around his ears. His eyes, which usually were filled with affection, now were filled with terror.

Land recognized that it was indeed Tony's face.

"Y-you have to find Misty now!" Tony advised. "She's in danger, with the boss."

"What do you mean?" asked Land as he lowered his short sword. Tony took a breath before replying. "The boss was bitten by a Fear Rat. He'll lose his mind soon!"

CHAPTER 18



he woman who died had worked as a cook in a diner on the outskirts of town, but her true identity had never been known—so although they held a funeral for her, they couldn't spend too much money.

Regardless, a lot of people came to the diner to offer their condolences—enough to surprise the mistress. Most of them were beggars whom the woman had been kind to when she was alive. She had discreetly hidden the leftovers from the customers of the diner and taken them home to the beggars, half of whom were young children. They wept and wept, sniffing from their noses.

“Oh goodness, this is too depressing! It's bad for business! You can stay today, but you mustn't come tomorrow. Shoo! Off you go, to the back of the store!”

The mistress wanted to cry herself, but she deliberately spoke harshly to the beggars as she moved them to the back of the store. A small, handmade shrine had been placed there, and

the woman's body was being kept there inside an old wooden coffin.

A girl was sitting to the side of the coffin, swinging her legs in the air. Her black eyes stared intently at the ground.

"Poor thing."

"They got on so well."

"What's going to happen now?"

"Well, I'm not sure whether the mistress will look after her."

As they wept, the callers stroked the girl's head, patting her shoulder as they caressed and squeezed her hand.

The girl kept staring at the ground expressionless. After a while, though, she suddenly looked up, and her braided hair shook. "Mister!"

The man came with a frown on his face.

"Mister, mister—when is my mum going to wake up?"

Everyone choked up and was at a loss for words in response to the girl's question. Breaking the unbearable silence, one beggar whispered, "Terrible—they said it was a mistake."

In a flash, the man grabbed the beggar by his collar.

"Hey, where did you hear that?"

The man was so forceful that the beggar was terrified. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't know anything."

The man spoke in an irritated manner, "Idiot! I'm not angry with you. I'm asking you where you heard that!"

One of the beggar's friends butted in. "Pay him no attention, mister. He doesn't mean to—why are you talking nonsense?"

But the beggar shook his head vigorously. "No, no, I'm not talking rubbish. I heard it! I definitely heard it!"

"Yes, of course you did. Now, where did you hear it? Think carefully and tell me about it," the man said in a very different, kind voice.

The beggar puffed up his chest and answered, "At the back of the Kumade bar. They didn't know I was sleeping there. They were talking about how they had accidentally killed a woman. They were supposed to kill a merchant boss."

According to the beggar, the men were talking about how they'd accidentally killed a woman, and because they'd made this mistake, they were taking too much time. They were worried that if they didn't hurry, the real target would leave on a journey. The man listened this far, and then he left for the Kumade bar to find the supposed target.

When he saw the front of the bar, though, he realized he was a moment too late: There was great commotion because someone had been murdered. When he entered the bar, he heard some men who looked like adventurers talking.

"Look at that neat wound—it must have been an assassin."

"Definitely. Hmph. That's scary. I wouldn't want to be targeted by an assassin."

"Hey, do you have reason to be targeted?"

"Ha! Don't mess with me—my booze will go bad."

They seemed fine drinking amid this commotion.

The man delved through all the noisy onlookers to gaze down upon the fat man who was lying face down on the floor in a clumsy way. As he had suspected, there was a small prick at the back of the man's neck, and it had changed into a purple color. The area around the man's eyes went hot immediately. At the same time, rage steamed up inside of him, and he felt his mind go blank. He could think of nothing else. He looked back at the customers and waiters who were regarding him suspiciously, and then he backed out of the bar and left.

The sun shone on the top of his head, and his shadow darkened around his feet.

They can kill someone this easily, in broad daylight?

His anger eventually gave way to a thick, dark, unforgiving hatred.

CHAPTER 19



With Land's coaxing, Tony started to slowly explain what had happened. These events had started only hours ago—about half a day ago at the maximum.

The rain and wind had been strong, Tony explained, and it had been dark—the sort of weather that made you feel depressed.

After lunch, one of the assassins, who had been drinking tea, stood up suddenly and started to strangle another assassin, who was sitting next to him, also drinking tea. It was as though he had gone mad. The people around him held him down, saving the life of the man who was being strangled.

But the man who had changed so suddenly started to wreak havoc. His eyes bloodshot, he began to break everything around him. After a short while, he was tied up with a rope, and then put into a jail cell. By that time, he was frothing at the mouth, and he eventually fell unconscious.

“Did he eat anything bad?” the assassins had asked one another. But they all shrugged, unable to recall anything strange happening—until one assassin finally remembered something.

“Oh yeah,” that assassin had recalled, “he was making some noise about being bitten by a rat before lunchtime.”

So, they all had started to worry about whether he’d gone mad because he’d contracted some infectious disease after getting bitten by the rat.

They had just heard word about how a man called Assassin Killer had appeared at a nearby Assassin Guild and had exterminated the lot of them, so they were especially worried. They were thinking about when they might get attacked, and it was made worse because they hadn’t yet prepared their defenses.

“Go check if there are any animals like rats around—check every corner!”

Everyone had searched around frantically at the instruction of the boss. They didn’t know what might be lurking where—perhaps the Assassin Killer already was in the house somewhere.

They also had no idea what kind of man their opponent was, so the fear among the assassins escalated.

And then, when it was way past sunset, all the guild torchlights had disappeared. Of course, they hadn’t all disappeared at once—but by the time the assassins realized they’d been picked off, everything was pitch black.

The boss had started yelling at the panicking assassins not to fall into a trap—but then there was a loud scream, loud enough to drown out the boss’ yelling. Although they couldn’t tell what had happened in the dark room, they could sense that somebody had dropped to the floor.

A man appeared among the assassins who all were asking frantically what had happened. It wasn't the Assassin Killer, though—it was one of their own. He had the same eyes as the man they had thrown into jail earlier, and he started to attack everyone around him.

"Misty was in danger, too" Tony said.

Land wrinkled his brow and glared at Tony when he heard this.

"But she was a great help. She's a light, nimble girl. We all understood that it was dangerous to stay there, so the boss took Misty and Anthony, and he fled down to the basement. Naturally, I went with them."

When Tony had gotten this far into his story, he let out a heavy sigh.

"Then, we were attacked, too."

"By the Fear Rats?"

"Fear Rats—that's what they're called, right?"

"It doesn't matter. And . . . ?"

"Well, we managed to ward them off somehow. The boss had gone to get torchlights from the storage room, because they all had disappeared. When we used those, the rats got really frightened and stayed away. They were screeching out."

"And . . . ?" Land asked in a irritated voice, hurrying Tony along.

"That was when he came out—that terrifying man."

"Bloody Law?"

"Yes. He's not human. I didn't sense his presence at all. Before I knew it, I was fleeing desperately, and that's when I got separated from the boss. It was petrifying. I was almost attacked by Johnny, and then Jones Spick was dead."

"Right. And you haven't seen the boss and the others since?"

"Yes—but Misty and the others are still with him, and they definitely managed to survive. I'm sure they survived, and they're all now hiding in the basement."

After hearing Tony's story, Land's expression was one of great relief—but it only lasted a moment. "Is it true that the boss was bitten by a rat? Did you see it?"

"Yeah, it's true. I remembered later. Everyone who's bitten by one of those rats, their eyes turn red like blood. The last time I saw the boss, his eyes were like that."

"Ha ha ha—are you sure that they weren't just bloodshot?" joked Land, testing Tony.

But Tony shook his head and lowered his voice to a tone of revulsion. "No, it wasn't like that. Those eyes weren't normal."

Tony's eyes appeared to be welling up with tears, so Land lightly patted him on the shoulder.

"So, you've done well not to get noticed by Bloody Law."

"Y-yeah, I pretended to be dead. I guess I'm just a small fish, and I think he's looking for the boss, anyway."

"Okay. So, are there any others alive?"

Tony shrugged at Land's question.

"I don't know. But Land, if you don't go help her, Misty will be in danger."

Land nodded deeply.

Olba, who had until now remained silent as he listened in, said, "How many doors did you say there were that lead to the basement?"

"I remember there are two in the house, and there's one outside—but we only know one of them. Right, Tony? Do you know any of the others?" Land asked.

Tony shook his head. "I think I heard that they made it so there's just one place inside, though."

“Okay. Well, I hope they escaped successfully,” Land said, but he thought that it was probably unlikely for things to have worked out so well.

“To get to the basement, we have to go back to that first floor entrance,” Land told Olba.

Olba, however, pointed out the stark reality to him. “He’s downstairs, and the Fear Rats are there, too.”

Land shouted back at him, “So? We can’t just sit here and wait!”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying that we have to plan this out carefully.”

“What plan?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ve been thinking about it but . . .” Olba sighed.

If only Duan were here now, he’d manage it. He’d think of something I’d never think of. Whichever way I look at it, we’re at a disadvantage. That guy’s got keen night vision and can control the Fear Rats. We’ve managed so far with the starlight poking through from the windows, but farther inside, on the first floor or the basement, it’ll be pitch dark. If we walk around with lanterns, though, we’d be advertising our whereabouts. Shoot! If only we could put on the torchlights.

Olba had thought this far when he suddenly raised his head. “I know. Hey, Land, is there a stock of torchlights here? It’d be good to light them and put them up on the walls as needed.”

Land shrugged. “If there were a stock of them, they’d be in the storage room.”

“Man, where the Fear Rats were?”

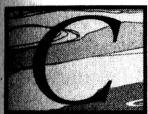
“Yeah. And even if we did light some replacements, it’d be pointless if they were just snubbed out again.”

Olba’s shoulders dropped at this comment.

There's no use. It can't be helped—we'll have to tackle him head on!

He geared himself up again and said, "Okay, then we'll move this chest!" Olba went to the staircase and moved aside the chest he had used earlier to block the stairs. The stairwell, waiting underneath, was engulfed in darkness deeper than ink.

CHAPTER 20



reak creak creak. The staircase creaked with each step as they descended. As the three men made their way down to the first floor, they cringed while listening to the noise they made. Luckily, there was no one on the first floor. They couldn't sense the rats running about, either.

That's strange. If I were Bloody Law, I'd target us as we were coming down from the second floor . . . His movements are difficult to read. Shoot, this is tricky, Land thought.

All three made their breathing quiet and returned to the entrance on the first floor. In that small room at the back, a passageway to the basement was hidden behind a part of the floor, which slid away to reveal a set of stairs leading down.

Olba and the others took turns descending the stairwell into the basement, where it was darker yet. They exchanged glances as they slid the stairwell entrance shut and caught their breath.

"I wonder if he knows we're here," Land asked.

Tony cocked his head in wonder—but Olba pointed to a torchlight holder, saying, “Unfortunately, it seems he does.” The torchlights had been taken from the basement, as well.

“Man, it’s really quiet, isn’t it?” Land walked on, carefully checking his way so as not to trip. “So, how many members do you think there were in this guild?” Land asked. Immediately, he corrected himself without thinking. “I mean, how many *are there?*” He was cross at himself for unthinkingly using the past tense.

Tony blew out his cheeks and answered, “Well, about seven here.”

Not too many individuals lived at the Assassin Guild headquarters. Some rented out houses here and there, but they never rented one place for long, and they moved houses periodically. Sometimes, they would come and stay at the guild before they’d move on to their next address. For camouflage, sometimes they would employ children or the elderly to make their homes appear more like farmhouses.

“Man! If the book knew we were going to get attacked, he should have evacuated people to someplace else,” complained Land.

Tony just shook his head. “Of course. And the boss was planning to do just that—but Bloody Law’s movements were quicker. The boss had started putting his plan into motion, bit by bit. Naturally, he evacuated the children and the elderly first—like Garcina. She fled to a village somewhere.”

“Okay, so Garcina is safe.” Garcina, with the very short and stout body. When Land remembered her wrinkly smile, he was truly relieved that she’d managed to escape.

There were three jail cells lined up in a row, and the room next to those was where people were tortured. When Land had tried to run away, he’d been tortured in this room.

To the side, there were several chairs and one large table. When it was necessary, they listened to information here or came up with plans.

That was all that could be seen with one look. But Land was certain it wasn't everything. There must be a door hidden somewhere that would lead to the boss' room.

"Hey, Tony," Land called out. Tony was so surprised that he almost jumped.

"W-w-what is it? I thought my heart was gonna stop beating."

"Pah, you're an assassin, too, aren't you? Why are you so scared? Do you know where the boss' room is? You're old stock. I'm sure you have an idea about where it is."

However, Tony simply shook his head. "No, the boss never told anyone. He did disappear from time to time, but I've never seen where."

"Right." *Well, I suppose it's the room where he's hidden his clientele lists and documents, so I'm sure he wouldn't tell anyone, even his own family.*

Land settled himself and then started to look for the hidden door.

During that time, Tony was frightened, as usual, and he kept looking around and listening out for sounds. Every time he heard something, he was startled.

Olba, frowning, started walking around checking things. He wasn't a thief, though, so he didn't have any skills for detecting hidden doors. It all looked like damp, black walls to him.

On the other hand, Land was an ex-thief, so he went around diligently checking every ridge on the wall and every bump on the floor.

The floor of the hidden door is sometimes more polished than the rest. This was a skill he'd learned long ago. As he investigated,

Land felt his old self come back to life again. He spread out his palms and caressed the walls. He searched for what he was looking for with the light from the lantern. Although the wound in his ear was still throbbing and painful, and he was running a fever, he was so focused on his task that he didn't feel a thing.

While Land was looking for the hidden door, strangely, there were no movements from Bloody Law.

"Something strinks . . ." Olba noted as he looked up at the ceiling.

Tony looked at him with surprise. "S-something smells?"

"Idiot. No, not like that. It's just that something isn't right."

While the two of them conversed, Land made a small cry of joy.

"Have you found it?" Olba turned around.

Instead of replying, Land pushed one part of the wall with his shoulder, and a hidden door appeared. A panel that looked like part of the wall moved back, opening a space wide enough for one person to go through. When Land pushed that to the right, the hidden door slid away, and they could see a narrow passageway farther back.

"Amazing! Land, you're quite some guy to find the hidden door!" cried Tony in a loud voice. His voice reverberated in the basement, surprising both Land and Olba.

"Hey! Your voice is too loud!" cautioned Olba, but Tony laughed in an eerily confident way.

"Is that so? I'm sorry."

Land had a terrible feeling—Tony was acting strange. And then, he suddenly thought of something. "You . . . When you were on the second floor, you said you pretended to be dead to avoid him. But before we went upstairs, we heard

creaking footsteps. If those weren't Bloody Law's, and they weren't yours, then whose were they?"

Tony didn't say a word, but he started to chuckle.

"I thought it was strange when we came down the stairs," Land continued. "That would have been the best time to attack us. That's what I would have done."

When Land had said this much, Olba screamed, "Shoot! We've basically ushered him to the hidden door. Land, quick! Get inside and close the door!"

CHAPTER 21



efore Land could make any moves, though, Tony already was standing in front of the hidden door.

"I won't let you!"

He was gripping a curved knife in his hand. Tony's specialty was to cut under his opponent's neck with this knife. His swift movements were too quick for his opponents. You wouldn't imagine that someone of his age could move so fast.

"Tony! Why? Why did you betray us?" Land cried out.

Tony's face wrinkled up momentarily as if he were about to cry. "I-I I want to live! I don't want to die!"

It was his absolute truth—a concept that was enough to make your blood curdle. Even though he himself had taken away so many countless lives as an assassin, he did not wish to die.

At that moment, the ceiling opened up behind Olba. And then, in no time at all, a man like a black shadow descended, followed by narrow sleepy eyes, which floated behind him—the Fear Rats.

Land shone the lantern at them in a flash. The man quickly covered his eyes—but in the next moment, he threw his arms down to his sides.

Clang! Along with the metallic sound, sharp claws grew from the man's arms. The Iron Claw grew out from the palms of his hands, and the metal rakes were so long that they almost touched the ground. It wasn't obvious what kind of scales his black armor was made of, but it was shining as though it was slimy, and it fit his body perfectly, so that it almost looked like his skin. And attached to his arms where the Iron Claw came out were two metal-sheeted gauntlets.

Usually, monks dressed themselves simply and didn't wear any armor. But this kind of armor, which was almost like a second skin, wouldn't interfere with the man's movements, Olba thought.

When the man lifted his head, Olba, Land, and even Tony gulped.

He was not human. His long, messily chopped hair was close to white, but there was black hair meshed in here and there. His hair was standing on end, and it cast sharp shadows of his forehead and cheeks, which were shaven clean as though with a sharp knife. Half his gaunt face was covered in a metallic sheet that shone a black light.

Perhaps he was hurt there and was hiding it. Both his eyes were open and sparkled gold. His cold, unwelcoming eyes had no hint of emotion.

But the feature that was most telling was his ears. They were not human. They were not much different in shape from an elf's ears, but they were long. On top of that, the shadow had several horns protruding from him.

Olba could sense an aura coming off Bloody Law's entire body. *Has there ever been more powerful bloodlust than this?* Even the veteran fighter Olba felt the bottom of his soul go cold.

Woosh! Bloody Law thrust his claws up into the air, interlinking them and then grinding them together.

At this point, Tony went running up to him with his hands grasped together. "Mister, I've shown you the hidden door as promised. Ha ha. I'm sure the boss is in there. So, I'll be leaving now!"

Bloody Law eyed Tony sharply. At the same time, his long claws moved quickly.

Thud. Tony fell forward. Both his front and his back had been pierced at the same time, and he was coughing up blood.

"Y-you . . . promised . . ." he said, coughing as the blood hemorrhaging from his insides began choking his throat. Those were his last words.

Clang! Bloody Law glanced Tony's way while simultaneously charging an attack on Olba, who was right in front.

"Urgh!" Olba had been a moment too late to evade the strike, and there was a hole in his plate armor as a result. The rats running around at his feet had distracted him. The Iron Claw hadn't reached his body, but the strike he'd felt above his armor was strong, and it felt like an electric shock.

"Olba!" shrieked Land.

Olba screamed back, "I'll keep him here. You go! Quickly! There isn't much time!"

"O-Olba!"

Land still stood frozen to the spot, so Olba yelled out again. "I said there isn't time, right? This guy will be difficult even for me. And with a side serving of rats! Damn. Go away, go away!" He struck at the rats by his feet, which were trying to jump up on him.

Watching this, Land bit his lip firmly and turned to run down the passageway beyond the hidden door.



CHAPTER 22



loody Law's attacks never weakened. *Shoot! What kind of training does he do? If he's a long ear, then he shouldn't have strength like this. Maybe he's just a freak?*

Olba was using his utmost strength to deflect the Assassin Killer's attacks.

At this rate, I'll be backed into a corner in no time. And they say that offense is the best defense . . . But it was too difficult to avoid the rats and the attacks coming from Bloody Law, all while thinking of making an attack himself in this darkness.

Land had taken the lantern, so the only light in the room was from the weak starlight that was seeping in from the entrance where Bloody Law had come down.

Crack! Olba's longsword caught Bloody Law's claws firmly. At the same time, he had a thought. He remembered that Bloody Law hadn't liked the light, and he'd hidden his eyes from the lantern.

Oh yeah, and these rats don't like the light, either, right? I don't have fire, though. At this thought, Agnis' face rose up in his mind involuntarily. Man, if only that hot-tempered girl were here now—not only would she get the Fear Rats, she'd burn Bloody Law into a cinder, too. No, no, I don't even need a raging fire like that . . . something like a match . . . Hey! I know. I just bought some matches!

Olba examined his waist bag in a hurry. He'd bought emergency provisions in the town of Orland, including matches.

Don't panic. Don't panic! he said to himself over and over again as he brought out the matches. These matches were made especially for adventurers, so they could be struck anywhere, and their fire was not easily extinguished. They were a few times more expensive than ordinary matches, and their fire was strong—and because their sticks were long, you could hold them alight for a while.

Pssst. He struck the match on the wall nearby and thrust it forward toward Bloody Law and the rats.

They scuttled back for a moment like Olba had expected. Bloody Law corrected his stance quickly but the rats were panicked and started to run around in circles.

I see. Their weakness is fire! I have enough of an opponent in Bloody Law, so it'd be better if I weren't distracted by them. Olba threw the match that was burning brightly toward the rats. And then, who could have guessed what happened next!

He struck the back of one rat with perfect aim.

Squeak squeak! In agony, it writhed around and fell—furthermore, it started to billow up in flames as though the rat had been soaked in oil. The rat on fire started to light the other rats, one by one.

“W-what? What? What's happening?”

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Olba looked at them, awestruck. The rats ran around as though they had gone crazy. And because these balls of fire were running about, the flames started to spread to other areas of the basement.

"S-shoot! The house is on fire!" screamed Olba, but he was already too late. Some of the rats, still on fire, had scuttled upstairs. The crackling sound of fire spread, and the smoke stung his eyes.

"Yikes!" Olba coughed, trying to avoid the smoke using his hands.

It was then that Bloody Law's claws suddenly scratched the tip of Olba's nose.

"Friggin' heck! H-hey, mister, wait a sec! Ha! I guess you wouldn't wait, though!"

Olba struck his head against the wall by accident, and then he immediately sat down on the spot because of the pain.

Bloody Law, who was right in front of him, moved closer.

"Augh! P-please! Stop!"

Olba knew that his opponent wasn't the sort to listen to his request, but he tried anyway. And to his surprise, Bloody Law's hand stopped.

"W-what? I guess it's always worth a shot . . ." Olba looked up slowly.

Bloody Law opened his mouth and spoke in a hoarse voice, "You're a fighter."

"Do I look like anything else?" answered Olba.

Bloody Law asked further, "Why are you defending that murderer?"

Olba shrugged. "Just how things turned out, I suppose. Land used to be a thief. We've become friends of sorts. He asked me to be his bodyguard."

"You can be friends with a murderer?"

"Well, even though he is a murderer, he's not doing it because he likes it. He struggles with it himself. He's suffered, too," answered Olba.

Bloody Law's eyes narrowed—but a moment later, his eyes opened brightly again, flashing a golden color.

"Nonsense! Y-you, you are guilty, too. I-I-I-I will p-p-pun-punish-punish you!" Bloody Law bared his teeth as saliva trickled down from the corner of his mouth.

H-he . . . thought Olba, when suddenly Bloody Law resumed his attacks against him.

"Argh!"

Olba felt like he was being branded by red-hot tongs. The long, sharp Iron Claw had scratched Olba's cheeks.

"Come on, beg for your life, too, just like that middle-aged man on the floor there. Ha ha ha . . . It's funny, isn't it? Even murderers want to live. Ha ha ha," Bloody Law snickered as he clicked his claws. Soon after, he yelled, "How convenient!"

The Iron Claw came at Olba again. This time, it was directed at his opposite cheek.

"Whoa. Don't think I can take that twice. No way," Olba said, avoiding the strike. Then, with his back hand, he thrust his longsword toward Bloody Law's chest.

Bloody Law dodged the attack easily as he floated into the air like a piece of thin cloth. It was like child's play to him.

Olba didn't even have time to catch his breath. *His strength and focus are extraordinary. His levels are definitely above mine, too. And on top of that, he's gone completely mad. He's had a Berserk +4 +4 cast on him. Man, I can't bear this. . . .*

As Olba was thinking this, a strong tremor registered, vibrating right through his stomach.

Dirt fell from the ceiling above in bits and pieces.

What's happened? Maybe a column's fallen?

Both Land and Bloody Law's eyes wandered. And then, they heard a sharp, shrill scream coming from somewhere above. It was definitely mingled with the sound of the billowing and crackling flames, and it sounded like a woman's voice.

Was that Misty? Olba thought.

At that moment, Bloody Law retreated quickly from him, disappearing upstairs before Olba could blink.

Olba tried to follow him quickly, but he was a moment too late. A column or part of one of the house's beams fell down to the floor upstairs, completely blocking the entrance.

CHAPTER 23



and, on the other hand, could not rid himself of the thought of having left Olba alone with Bloody Law—or of Tony's betrayal, and his unfortunate end that followed. That was why Land was panicked.

He was so frustrated and annoyed that he could have torn his own chest apart. Beads of sweat rose on his forehead even though it was winter.

Misty! Where are you?

A winding stone passageway continued farther beyond the hidden door. Every so often, there were doors to small rooms, and he opened every one of these to check inside.

"Misty!" he screamed continually. But all that he heard was his own voice. It seemed that the moss growing on the stone walls absorbed sound, so the secret passageway was eerily quiet.

He came to a place where the passageway turned a corner, where there were two symmetric rooms, and then he came to a dead end. She was in neither room. The room before the end

seemed to be the boss' room, but there was no hint of anyone having been in there.

Was it a lie that they fled here? No, it can't be. Nobody actually said they had fled here, though—everyone was just convinced that they had, including Tony and Bloody Law. That means he hasn't seen Misty or the boss or the others. Are they not in this house after all? Maybe they found a good time to escape into the forest? In that case, I don't need to panic.

That's a relief but . . . but I can't relax. Maybe I should check the rooms again? Perhaps there's another hidden door. . . . But where?

The passageway was long, and there were four rooms. Land breathed deeply as he tried to calm himself down.

I won't look for a needle in a haystack, but I will try to think about where the boss would have made a secret door. What's more, I should think about where it would be so that it would avoid detection by an enemy.

Land opened his eyes wide as he thought. He looked back at the passageway he had just come from.

How about the part of the passageway just by the entrance? It would bring you out behind the enemy—but other than that, it would be inconvenient. Not much of a point to that. So . . . the end of the passageway. Around here?

He investigated the wall of the dead end. There were no suspicious ridges or bumps.

And this would be a really obvious place. No. He's so careful—the boss would not have made it here, in such a likely place. Maybe midway in the passageway, or in one of the walls in the rooms? I'll have to check each and every one of them.

As Land contemplated this last thought, he remembered the bend.

That was an unnatural bend, seeing that all the other bends were curved and winding like a snake. He had already started running when he had thought this far.

It's no mistake. It's there! It was just like he had suspected. He discovered the secret door quickly when he looked at the growth of the moss on the walls. The state of emergency he felt was momentarily gone as he did this.

"Gotcha!"

He was so excited that he could have whistled, and his chest felt hot with excitement. It was the excitement of adventure that he had long since forgotten.

There was a sound like "dunk," and a part of the wall moved back. It was made in the same way as the previous hidden door, and it could be slid to the right. Inside, it was only big enough for one person to enter.

He looked up, thinking that this couldn't be it. He checked all around. But there was nothing there.

"What? No way—is this a fake?"

Hey, hey. This isn't being careful. This is being a freak.

He thought hard as he crouched down and twisted his head to investigate.

"Hmph?"

He noticed immediately that there was an unnatural bump.

It might be a trap.

He retreated back into the passageway, and then he aimed at the bump with his slingshot. It clicked as he hit it. Suddenly, a rope ladder came down from above.

"Oh, wow!"

It was quite a robust ladder, because it had been made with iron rungs.

Land snorted. "It's well made." And feeling impressed, he climbed up.

It was then that he heard a big tremor.

"Whoa!"

Dirt fell down from above. He clung to the ladder until it finally became quiet and still again.

"What? What was that?"

He tried to calm his quickening spirits and decided to simply climb the ladder. There was a handle at the top, and to get out, he had to turn it and push it up.

Brrr . . . He heard the breathing sound of a horse and he looked around questioningly. He also could smell animal excrement mixed with the smell of hay. Although it was dark, when he leapt up above, he could immediately tell that he was inside the stables.

Land's and Olba's horses were tied up there, but they were strangely agitated. They bared their teeth and shuffled about.

They're scared of something.

"Hey, what's happened?" he said as he approached them—and then he noticed something different, the smell of something burning. He also heard the crackling of fire.

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Land went out front in a flash, and he could see smoke puffing out from the back of the headquarters. He also could see bright flames inside the otherwise pitch black house.

"Oh no!"

Land returned to the stables so he could warn Olba. But it wasn't necessary, as Olba was climbing up the ladder already. He was dirty with soot, and he had a fresh cut on his face.

Olba yelled, "Hey! We're in trouble. Misty and the others are still inside!"

Another big tremor could be heard.

Has something burnt and fallen somewhere inside the house? Or was that something else . . . ?

The wind was as strong as ever, and it spread the flames.

At this rate, it won't take long for the fire to spread through the whole house.

The clouds had disappeared before long, and it was a freezing night sky. The blue-white moon shone down on Olba and Land as they stood motionless.

CHAPTER 24



Right in front, there was a thin, middle-aged man lying on the ground, with his neck bent at a funny angle. He did not move—not even a bit.

This was expected, as it had been more than an hour since he'd lost his life.

The man looking on was hearing the sound of his own breath and heart.

“The skills that have been imparted into your hands, your feet, your whole body, they have the power to take life in a instant. That means you yourself have become a weapon. Do you understand? Never use that weapon for murder.”

He could hear his master's words over and over again, repeated in a muffled voice. The tone of his master's voice went up and down, almost like a ringing in his ears. The man held his head.

He clawed at his hair, which at the time was still short and black.

But it was all too late already. The wheels of the carriage were already out of tune. The carriage had derailed off the track and it was now hurtling down the hill with increasing speed. He had already lost the psychological power, his support, to stop it.

The assassin who had killed that woman, as a mistake—maybe he was an unfortunate soul himself, but there was no way for the man to know this. Even if he did, it would not have changed a thing. The woman was murdered. And the little girl's one and only mother was no longer there.

Death made everything pointless. Sudden, unexpected deaths, especially, stopped everything. It was no easy feat for the people who had been left behind to overcome this.

To bury a person is as hard as it is the time is long that one spends loving them. No matter the consolation you receive, you loved them more deeply. No, it wasn't just hard to bury someone, but also sad—and regrettable enough to drive one insane.

They say that time heals all wounds. There are indeed things that time heals. It cures wounds with a medicine called forgetfulness, and it eases the pain. But the man would not allow himself to forget the sadness or the rage that he was unable to express in words. Even though he had chased the assassin who killed the woman and had successfully avenged her death, nothing ended inside of him. In fact, instead of ending, it was a beginning.

He started to earn a reputation for punishing assassins. Nobody was opposed to it, and there were even people who thanked him. On the other hand, no one would come near him.

He didn't tell anyone that he was killing assassins, but he was slowly changing into a different creature. His murderous aura had an awesome strength, and everyone narrowed their

eyes when regarding it. Their necks would shiver, and they would cast their eyes downward, getting as far away from him as quickly as possible.

The man who had been training as a monk, who had fought with bare fists, decided to increase his murderous attacking power by equipping those hands with Iron Claws. He also decided to wear special scale armor, very much unlike the rest of the monk clan. It was an armor made with the scales from a rare monster called a Dumun, which has been strengthened by magic. It was tight fitting, like a second skin, and its defensive qualities were high. Because of this, it didn't get in the way of his monk fighting techniques.

When he'd nearly been killed while fighting a skilled assassin, he saw the limits of fighting alone, and so he also started to control Fear Rats. That had been the hard battle in which he'd lost half his face—although the other assassin had lost his entire face.

It was about this time when he had begun to call himself Bloody Law. His short black hair had grown long, and it had turned vividly white.

He was of mixed blood. His mother was a human, and his father was an Atmosson. The Atmossons were a tall and slim species that had a special ability—they could see well in the dark. It would take them a while to adjust to the light, though. So, if they suddenly went from a dark place to a light place—or if a light were thrust in their face at night—they would not be able to see for a while. However, once they adjusted, they were fine. They had characteristically pointy ears, but they weren't particularly adept at magic like elves.

And unlike elves, they were strong and robust. They were a few times more athletic than humans. They were better than cats when it came to walking without sound or jumping.

And they also were able to jump higher than double their own height.

The man, to draw out these skills, went to spend some time with his father's honored teacher, who was also his master. He had lost his parents early, and he was all alone in the world. The master was the only one he could rely on. The training was cruel, but he couldn't run away, as he didn't have anywhere to go.

When he turned twenty-five, he came down the mountain. And the mother who had exactly the same dark eyes as the little girl was the first person he had ever loved.

CHAPTER 25



and, his long, red hair caressed by the wind, asked with a distraught face, "So, which way? Which way did the scream come from?"

But Olba could only cock his head. He had only heard the scream faintly from the basement, but he had a feeling that it had come from the second floor. That was how far the voice had sounded.

When Olba told Land this, Land bit his lip and started to run.

He was heading to the entrance to the left of the house so that he could ascend to the second floor like before. But along the way, he thought he heard a piece of glass shatter, and shards of glass came flying down from the second floor windows. At the same time, flames billowed out, burning brightly. Immediately after that, the first floor windows shattered and fell. Through the gaping hole in the wall, he could see an ocean of flames. He could barely see the staircase. Land wrinkled his brow and started to run again.

Olba, after releasing the horses in the stable, ran after Land. Land tried to open the door to the house but pulled it back, saying, "Ouch! Man, that's hot!" The metallic door handle was hot as fire. When he'd worked up the courage to try again, a man struck the door from the inside and tumbled out.

His soft blond hair and his white face were covered in soot. He was looking up at Land with bloodshot eyes in disbelief. Land grabbed the man's shoulder.

"Anthony! Hey, where's Misty? Weren't you together?"

But he was in so much shock that he couldn't utter a word. "A-aarrrrrghh!" He was trembling feverishly and started to bawl.

"Idiot. Tell me quickly!" Land grabbed Anthony's collar and pulled him up, preventing him from falling to the ground.

Anthony, his elegant face all mucked up with tears and his nose dripping, said, "B-but . . . I couldn't help it. I-I'd been trying to protect Misty and the boss, too. How about you? Where were you at this crucial time?"

Land slapped Anthony across both cheeks with all his might. "Enough with your whining. Just tell me quickly—where is Misty? Is she safe?"

Anthony answered holding his cheeks. "I-I don't know. The boss was killed. U-urgh . . . I told Misty we should run but, but—"

"Fine—so where is she?"

"The secret room, on the second floor."

"There's a secret room on the second floor?"

"Y-yeah. Somewhere above the stables."

Above the stables . . . ? Land was connecting the dots inside his head. *I see! The second floor secret room is farther up, above the ladder from the basement that led to the first floor. We may have just missed each other.*

While Land and Olba were upstairs, Misty and the others had been down in the basement. And when Land went to the basement, that's ironically when Misty and the others had fled upstairs!

When Land had heard this much, he had no other use for Anthony. He let Anthony go and jumped into the burning room through the open door.

Of course, Olba followed after him, but the room was in a terrible state. The walls had fallen, and there were places where you could fully see into the other rooms.

Land, avoiding the flames, climbed up to the second floor.

Although the second floor was better than the first, there was no difference in the fact that it was still an ocean of flames here, too. A part of the floor had crumbled down, and some pillars had fallen, too.

"Misty! Misty!" Land cried out again and again.

"Land!"

Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice from behind the flames. The moment he heard that voice, he felt tears well up inside him.

She's alive . . . I've made it in time!

"Misty!" He called her name again, and then he ran toward her voice.

He found Misty and the boss, but the boss had already collapsed on the ground, and he was covered in blood. Misty was sitting down next to him, her long black hair falling around her like a little girl's hair, her white face dirtied with soot.

She screamed out to Land, who was running toward her, "Be careful. He's around!"

He braced himself, but he was a second too late, and there was a sharp metallic sound behind him. He managed to avoid the attack narrowly, but he fell forward with a thud.

Bloody Law flung up his Iron Claw to give Land a finishing blow.

“Argh!” There was a great scream. But the owner of that scream was not Land—Misty had covered Land’s body with her own.

“Misty!” shrieked Land.

He raised himself and held up Misty’s upper body. Her back had been pierced, and fresh blood spread out as he watched. The wound was on her back, a little lower than her heart. Land screamed over and over again, his own body dyed in her blood.

“Misty! Please, Misty, don’t die!”

CHAPTER 26



Olba came up straight after Land, but because everything had happened so quickly, there was nothing he could do.

Bloody Law was just standing there.

He's trembling . . . ? Olba was surprised when he saw Bloody Law, whose hands were indeed trembling—trembling so violently that the talons of his Iron Claw clicked.

Is he getting agitated, because Misty defended Land and took the blow instead? In any case, I need to distract him from Land and Misty.

Olba thrust his longsword he'd been holding in one hand out toward Bloody Law, saying, "Hey, mister. I'll be your companion first. You'll have to wait until after killing me before you can get to him."

The Assassin Killer looked toward Olba quickly, opening his eyes wide at the fighter's provocative manner.

"There were Fear Rats before, but now we're on equal terms," Olba said as he exchanged looks with Land. *I'll earn us some time*, he telegraphed. *Take Misty and run.*

Land understood this and started to carry her up.

But she whimpered in a weak voice, "The boss . . ."

"Silly, you can't worry about other people now! Anyway, the boss is already—" Land was about to say the boss was already dead, but he wasn't sure, so he checked the boss' carotid artery while still carrying Misty. It was weak, but there was still a pulse. There was no way that Land could carry both of them in their condition and still run away, though.

"Right, okay. I'll take you first, but I'll come for the boss later. Okay?"

Misty half-opened her eyes and asked, "Promise . . . me?"

"Okay, I promise," answered Land, and Misty smiled with relief. But then, she looked up at Land and extended her hand in worry.

"Hmph? W-what?" asked Land. She extended her hands toward his ear.

"What . . . happened? Does your . . . ear hurt?"

"Like I said, don't worry about other people now!"

Land was overcome by emotion, but he pulled himself together. And then, he lifted Misty up and ran down the stairs.

"You can do it, Misty! I'm definitely going to save you. You are meant to be with me. Remember the country called Ronza? Let's go there. We'll make our own thief gang, and you'll be our mistress. Come on, please? I can't do it alone!" Land spoke to her from time to time as he ran.

The fire had begun to spread all around the house, and sparks were even flying down from the ceiling.

When Land finally got outside, he called out in a sharp voice to Anthony, who was still sitting down, trembling violently, "Hey, Anthony!"



Anthony looked up in surprise, and Land brought Misty over to him.

“Listen. The boss is still inside, so I’m going back. Look after Misty until I return.” Land shook Anthony, grabbing both his shoulders, and Anthony nodded many times at Land’s sincere words.

“O-o-okay. I won’t ever run away again. I swear I’ll protect her!”

Land had half a thought to reply sarcastically to the cowardly way Anthony spoke, but he decided it was stupid. If he had a moment to spare, he wanted to spend it with Misty—but he couldn’t go back on his promise he’d made earlier. He let out a small sigh as if to break away from his feelings, and then he ran back into the house on fire.

Misty, wait until I come back!

CHAPTER 27



“A rrrrrgh!” yelled Bloody Law. He was charging toward Olba with his Iron Claw crisscrossing rapidly. Due to his speed, the light reflecting off the metal made an arc around him, which looked like melted candy.

“Argh! Ugh!” Olba was doing the best he could to deflect Bloody Law’s attacks with his longsword. He wanted to think that Bloody Law would tire at some point—and most normal opponents would. But Olba found it unbearable when he thought that, in Bloody Law’s case, this seemed unlikely.

And even if Olba did consider making an offensive attack, it would be difficult, as he found it almost impossible to read his enemy’s movements.

The fire around them had gotten stronger, and the locations they placed their feet were getting more unreliable and shaky, too. Bloody Law was backing Olba farther and farther into a corner, and his ragged white hair was becoming more and more unruly.

“Man, I’ve had enough already. Heck, I have no place left to go!”

They had done one circuit of the room and had returned back to where the boss was laying on the floor. Just behind them, the wall had burnt off, and the floor had collapsed, so the first floor could be seen.

They were roughly above the front entrance. Olba could see chairs and tables here and there, black in the sea of flames. He also could see the entrance to the basement. The pillar that had fallen earlier to block the entrance was crackling now as it burned brightly.

“Friggin’ heck! I’ll be out if I fall this way, too!” *Iron Claw in front and a sea of flames behind. Man, what a show!*

Olba was in no situation to be joking around, but he couldn’t help having one useless thought after another. Despite that, he actually thought he was doing okay—although it was more likely acceptance and resignation rather than feeling he was doing okay.

Clang! And then, with no advance warning, he was under an incredibly sudden attack. The Iron Claw came crashing down on Olba’s shoulder. And how terrible—the plate armor was sliced open and the claws had reached all the way down to the chain mail below.

It was a regrettable strike!

Olba, speechless, fell to his knees from the impact and the pain. At least he was lucky enough not to have fainted, but he was unable to prepare for the next attack.

He opened his eyes wide. Through a blurry haze, he could see Bloody Law in double and in triple, making a pose as if to strike the finishing blow. Olba blinked frantically, trying to focus.

Sh-shoot. Move my legs and arms—at least my eyes. Focus! Olba was panicking inside when he heard a muffled voice.

"Hey, he's . . . not an assassin . . . or are you gonna . . . kill him, too? If so . . . you're worse than us assassins. . . ."

It wasn't Land's voice, so whose was it?

Olba glanced up to where the voice was coming from, and he was finally able to focus. It was the boss who had collapsed on the floor and was covered in blood. The boss was using all the strength he had left to look at Bloody Law and talk to him.

"I . . . hear that you're . . . combing out assassins like lice, to kill them . . . but what's . . . so different between . . . you and . . . us? And . . . there are people . . . who come to us . . . asking us to . . . kill others . . . What . . . happens to them? Are they . . . okay?"

Bloody Law peeled his eyes open wide, showing the whites of his eyes. And then, he screamed, "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" as he crushed the boss under his feet.

The boss vomited up some blood.

Olba stopped Bloody Law when he tried to stomp on the boss some more.

"Stop! His life is over without you doing that anyway. He can't be helped."

But Bloody Law was now so hot-tempered that Olba's words fell on deaf ears. This time, he started to kick the boss' head. For some reason, he wasn't using his Iron Claw. It was almost as though he wasn't using his full strength to hurt him—as if he was not killing him outright on purpose.

"Hey! Can't you hear me?" However much Olba screamed Bloody Law could only see the boss.

Shoot! "I'm saying stop!" Olba charged into Bloody Law with all his might. Even though Olba had thought that the Assassin Killer probably would move out of the way, he didn't, and went flying into the wall with a crash, instead. At that

moment, the crumbly wall came tumbling down, and Bloody Law was trapped underneath.

Bloody Law's upper body was buried underneath the rubble, and only a part of his legs could be seen—but they didn't even stir.

Somebody called out to Olba, who was standing there dumbfounded. He turned around slowly. There, he found Land, with the raging flames behind him, running toward him.

Land was about to ask what had happened, but he figured it out when he followed the direction of Olba's gaze and saw Bloody Law's altered appearance.

"Let's get out of here quickly. It wouldn't be surprising if the floor fell through any minute now," Land said as he dashed over toward the boss.

"How is he?" Land telegraphed to Olba with a look.

Olba answered, "He was conscious a minute ago, but . . ."

Land decided that it was his first priority to get the boss outside, so he tried to carry him—but the boss stopped his hand.

"Stop!"

It was a painful sounding voice, as if he'd squeezed it out from the bottom of his stomach.

"Boss!"

"I'm not gonna make it. I know that much . . . I'm in this business—I knew I wouldn't die an easy death. Anyway . . . what about . . . Misty?"

"Y-yeah, I think—no, I'm sure she'll make it. She's fine!" Land said, and the boss nodded with relief.

"Can you . . . tell her . . . that I was apologizing . . . ? I know . . . it makes no difference now . . . but I wish I'd . . . never made her . . . murder people."

"Okay, I'll tell her," answered Land.

The boss gripped his arm harder. "No . . . not just her. I should never have made you or Anthony . . . or Tom Roy do it, either . . . I should never have taken over this rotten guild in the first place. I should have died a long time ago."

Finally, tears trickled from the boss' eyes.

Land didn't know when the boss had taken over the guild, or how long ago, or why. Maybe he couldn't help it himself, and he'd had a reason for it that couldn't be explained in one sentence, just like every single one of the assassins who'd gathered here and were hurting together, complaining together—who'd had some kind of unavoidable reason. But the boss, who was now facing death, had never before shown any weakness or regret—at least, not in front of strangers. It had even looked like he'd been proud of the fact that he was the boss of an Assassin Guild.

But now he was crying like this—like he was just a fragile, old man. Tears still wetting his face, the boss said, "Make . . . Misty . . . happy."

He slowly closed his eyes. Those eyes were never to open again.

CHAPTER 28



ey, Land! We're in trouble!" shouted Olba, and Land looked up.

"Over there! Look!" Olba was pointing in the direction of the stairs to the first floor. But the stairs could no longer be seen—in their place were flames burning powerfully. It would be impossible to use the stairs in this condition.

That being said, they couldn't come up with another way of escaping. Jumping out the window was out of the question, because there was no floor in front of the window, as it had fallen through.

"Aaargh!"

"Careful!"

A beam came falling down from the ceiling just beside Land. If Olba hadn't pulled him out of the way, he would surely have been buried underneath. Their armor was already hot, and their capes were burnt—but they were so nervous now that they didn't notice they were burnt various places along their bodies.

"I have to get back to Misty!" screamed Land, and then he started to make a jump into the sea of flames.

"Wait! You'll just burn up and die if you go that way!" yelled Olba, pulling Land back and pinning back his arms.

Land resisted furiously and tried to break away from Olba's grip.

And at that moment, just around the stairs, the flames suddenly weakened—and they saw someone's shadow.

"Who is it?" asked Olba.

An unbelievable voice answered his call. "Olba! Olba, it's me! It's Duan!"

"*W-what?*"

Olba and Land stared round-eyed. Duan appeared in front of them, looking a lot tougher than before. Check was on his shoulder. And it wasn't just them—behind them were Clay Judah, Agnis, and even K'nock.

"Why?"

It wasn't surprising that Olba and Land were so shocked. Strangely, the fire had weakened just in the area around the new arrivals.

"We'll explain later. With my power and Agnis' combined, we've used a force field magic that strengthens our resistance to fire, but it won't last long," Clay Judah explained as he approached Olba and Land, who instantly felt cooler.

Agnis, who was usually so talkative, looked at Olba and Land with a face full of worry and gravity.

Oh yeah. She said her mother was an Elementaller. So, Fire will listen to what she says?

Land suddenly started speaking as though he had just remembered something. "O-oh, yeah! Just tell me this! Misty should have been outside. You don't know her, but there should have been a woman outside. She was hurt. How was

she? I asked a man called Anthony to look after her, but . . . was he looking after her?"

Duan and the others looked back at Land with clouded, questioning faces.

"What happened? There was a woman, right?"

"Y-yeah but . . . when we heard that you were still inside, we came in a hurry so . . ." Duan explained. "Y-yes, and anyway, we should get out of here quickly."

Land felt like he was almost crushed with a bad feeling, but he nodded weakly.

"Yeah. Of course. N-never mind. C'mon then, let's go!" he said.

But just as they started to go, there was a loud rumble from behind him.

They all turned to look—and in the dust and sparks of fire, they could see a black shadow with long hanging arms trying to get up. In the direction of their collective gaze, they could see Bloody Law's face in the gaps of the dust. Even Olba and Land, who should have been used to him by now, gulped at the sight. Agnis desperately held in a scream.

The metal panel that covered half his face had fallen off to reveal a caved-in forehead and a bare right cheek. It was a horrible wound—the skin was so thin that you could see the bones underneath, making his face look like a skull with a round yellow eye stuck on top.

"Land!" Olba drew Land, who had been standing dumbstruck, near him, readying his longsword.

"This guy—he's still alive?"

Fighting Bloody Law, you couldn't show one moment of hesitation. It'd be the death of you. Olba was the one who'd had the harshest experience with this and knew it better than anyone else. Knowing attack was the best form of defense, he

put this into practice and raised his sword. However, Duan made a sharp cry.

"Wait! Olba, wait a minute."

"What? W-why?"

Olba stopped his sword.

"Look. He's crying!"

"What?" When Olba looked at Bloody Law, he saw that the corner of his golden round eye—where the skin had changed shape and clung to the bone—was wet and glistening in the light. The glistening area got bigger as they looked, and it flowed down the caved-in cheeks right down to his chin.

He's crying. Bloody Law is really crying.

Olba, Land, Duan, Clay Judah, and Agnis stared at his tears with a strange feeling. Then, Bloody Law quickly turned around and looked behind him. There was no floor there, and all that could be seen was a sea of flames that continued farther down. Bloody Law looked at Land and the others once again, and then he slowly started to move backward.

It was almost as if he moved in slow motion, and it seemed like something out of a dream, with the white smoke billowing up, sparks flying from the fire, and the ravaging flames.

Bloody Law stepped and fell into those flames without hesitation. He looked almost like a black spider with long legs falling into the fire, gliding down by releasing its string—and as though the fire was a warm shawl being extended gently by the hands of a mother, ready to envelope him.

Everyone was shocked and in a daze.

"Come on, we really don't have any time. Let's go!" called out Clay Judah, and they all finally returned to their senses.

They finally returned to ground level safely at about the same exact time the stairs came crumbling down.

CHAPTER 29



he Assassin Guild had burned completely. It burned as though it would singe the freezing winter sky, and it burned until there was nothing left to be burnt.

Land stood gazing at the flames, not bothering to wipe the tears that were streaming down his face. Misty had not waited for him. She'd died in the arms of her new lover, Anthony. She had taken her last breath when Land had returned to rescue the boss.

"But she called out your name until the very end. I think she thought I was you," Anthony said quietly.

Land was silent, so Anthony continued, "She's always loved you. For some reason, she didn't want you to know that. There was nothing between us in the end."

But Land rejected those words. "It's fine. That's enough now."

Land sat down and embraced Misty, who was now limp and heavy. He wiped away the soot from her pretty face and tidied

her tangled black hair. She had been nicknamed Misty Lip, but those red lips had lost their color now. Land's tears dripped down and wet those lips. He quickly wiped them off—and then, Land gently kissed her.

Please wake up. Smile like you always do. Misty!

He squeezed her slender hand and intertwined his fingers with hers. Then, he noticed something hard on her finger and looked at it. There was a ring on her thin white ring finger that Land recognized. It was a silver ring with a small red stone. It wasn't very valuable, but it suited her thin fingers.

He hadn't forgotten it: It was the ring that Land had bought to give to her. But when Land had started to plan his escape from the guild, Misty had distanced herself from Land by pretending to be in love with Anthony. Land had not been able to believe this and was about to throw the ring away when he'd instead given it to Garcina, who had happened to come into his room at the time.

Garcina must have given it to you. And you've kept it all this time, on your person. I couldn't even help you . . . I didn't even try to think about how you felt!

Fresh tears fell from his eyes. Land held her soft slender body and wept and wailed as he collapsed down onto the ground.

Duan and the others waited for him at a slight distance. Duan and Agnis were crying out of sympathy, and their eyes were red. Olba, too, was sighing over and over again with a pained expression on his face. Clay Judah sat apart from them and stared silently at the burning house. Beside them were all their horses and, of course, K'nock and Check.

The battle had finished, but their returns were costly, and the final outcome could never be taken back.

CHAPTER 30



After they had left Agnis' mother's mansion, Duan and the others had headed toward Orland. They had arrived in the evening, when they'd heard that Olba and Land had just departed. And then, they found out the location of the Assassin Guild from Sven Giesen. Having had no time to enjoy their reunion with Prince Charles, they'd set off straight away.

When they returned to the castle again, this time with Olba and Land, it was with heavy hearts, although they were welcomed back with warmth.

The King of Orland listened to the details of their journey and gave special permission for Misty's funeral to take place. (Usually, funerals for assassins were unheard of, but they'd handled the funeral arrangements not for Misty, rather for a young woman named Cathy.) Garcina, who had fled to a nearby village, heard rumors about the funeral and had come running. When she saw the drastically changed Misty, she wept bitterly.

While she wept, she told them about the ring and how worried Misty had been about Land when he hadn't returned from his job. Even the people in the castle who didn't know the details of what had happened wept with sympathy for Garcina and Land.

Her body was buried in the cemetery that was located on the land that had been given to Duan. Every spare moment Land had, he spent visiting the cemetery, sitting in front of her grave in a daze. He wasn't eating his meals, and he looked pale.

"Hey, cheer up. This means you've managed to leave the Assassin Guild with a clean break. I'm not saying forget what has happened so far—I just mean you shouldn't waste the life you got back," Olba said when he came to the cemetery to try and cheer Land up.

Land nodded weakly. Then, he asked, "Um, that guy, Bloody Law, do you think he fell into the fire on purpose?"

Olba tilted his head. "Who knows? I don't know. Maybe he thought it was all over. Or maybe he wanted it to be over. He was a mystery in many ways."

"Yeah, I've never seen such a skilled monk."

"Indeed."

The duo sitting in front of Misty's grave gave a simultaneous sigh.



"So, what was he like, this master called the Opal? Did he teach you magic?" asked Charles, who never left Duan's side, even for a moment.

When Duan talked about the Opal and the monsters they had met on their travels and how he had leveled up, Charles listened with his eyes sparkling.

Agnis joined in on this conversation. Duan felt that she had changed once again since she had returned home—as though she had gone back to her original self, but not quite. She was a completely different person now compared to what she used to be—and she was no longer unusually nervous in Clay Judah’s presence, nor had she continued her erratic mood or the stubborn attitude. Now, there was no tension when she spoke to Clay Judah.



One afternoon, three days after Misty’s funeral, they all were together drinking afternoon tea when Clay Judah said to Land, “I’m thinking of leaving tomorrow. What will you do?”

Land stared at the bottom of his cup for a while, but then he quickly raised his head. “Y-yeah, of course I’ll come with you.”

And then, his face turned serious as he said, “I was really made aware this time of how deficient I am in strength and skill. I couldn’t even attack Bloody Law once.”

But Olba chuckled. “Well, I don’t think he was the sort of guy you could face. Even I couldn’t take him on.”

“But it was even a stretch for me to avoid his attacks.”

“Like I said, it was the same for me. Shoot! I’ve remembered it all again. I’m a fighter, too, you know? Or I thought I was, at least. Now, that’s a real worry. The one who should be feeling shame is me!” Olba said, showing no shame at all.

But Land felt a little better with Olba’s comment. He had been blaming his own shortcomings ever since that day.

What help did I actually give, having gone all the way there? I was tricked so easily, and I even showed him to the secret door!

Olba continued, “Anyway, you’re a thief, and as a thief, you performed well, eh?”

Land snickered. "This is a bit weird—compliments from *you*."

Clay Judah had been listening to their banter silently. Now, he said, "I suppose it is handy to have someone with you who has the skills of a thief. Although it would be even better in a small party if the thief could combine his skills with those of a fighter."

Land raised his eyebrows and looked at Clay Judah. "I-I can do that, if you give me some lessons in sword fighting. I was thinking about getting my adventurer card again, as well. I'd like to be a thief that can do face-to-face combat, too!"

"Sounds good," Clay Judah said as he smiled.

Agnis couldn't help but be taken in by that smile. She looked away quickly and then thought about how they all would be parting soon. She felt sad. *But I'm done with that now!* She tried to push aside her feelings and take a few deep breaths without getting noticed.

That's when Clay Judah addressed her. "Agnis, it's a shame that I never got to see your powerful Fire Magic. So, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm thinking of going to Ronza with Duan and Olba. Apparently, there are many people there who know a lot about magic. I'm thinking about learning some skills to control my own magic power."

Looking as though he had suddenly thought of something, Clay Judah then said, "Oh yeah, I was surprised at the Assassin Guild when you exhibited so much force in the fireproof force field magic. You really are protected by the spirits of Fire—more than you think. Perhaps from now on, when you're facing any difficulty, you should remember that."

Agnis made a big nod. K'nock, who was sleeping beside her, glanced up at his master, and then he closed his eyes again.

But there was another person there who was about to spurt out his tea when he heard their conversation—Olba.

“Hey, hey—I think I heard something, but maybe it was just the wind?”

“No, it wasn’t the wind. I’m employing you as my bodyguard, to travel to Ronza,” Agnis said, and Olba snickered.

“Employing me as a bodyguard? You must have wrangled a lot of pocket money from your mummy.”

“N-no! I did get a little but it isn’t like that. I don’t have a lot! Yes, the payment will be . . .”

Olba stopped the blushing Agnis. “We don’t need any payment.”

“What?”

Agnis was stunned into silence. She looked at Olba in disbelief, and he remarked moodily, “So, you’re gonna go improve your magic skills, right? You’re gonna go study lower level magic spells and other skills to control your magic, right?”

“Y-yes!”

“Then, it’s fine. It’s a basic requirement for any party to strengthen itself. You don’t have to employ me. And there’ll be a lot of monsters along the way who can be weakened by Fire Magic, too.”

Agnis blushed a deeper red and looked at Olba. Then, she looked at Duan.

Duan was also regarding Olba in disbelief. “So, you’ll adventure with me again? Wow! That’s amazing! I was thinking that this might finally be the end for us.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, that’s fine by me,” started Olba, but Duan started to whack him on his back.

“Oh, c’mon! No, I already decided to come with you, even if it meant I was hanging onto your leg. And anyway, I’m

thinking that I should concentrate on practicing my sword fighting. I think I've grasped—well, not quite grasped, but I think I'm within reach of getting the knack of sword fighting. It's become really fun for me, and I think I've got it. Hey, Olba, are you listening? You'll teach me, won't you? Like you said, it's a basic requirement for any party to strengthen itself, right?"

Olba decided to pretend not to hear him, and then in the end, he pretended to be sleeping, which made everyone laugh.

Check got on top of Olba's head and started to thump him, saying, "Hey, wake up! Wake up!" which made everyone laugh even more.

Clay Judah and Land, and then the threesome of Duan, Agnis, and Olba—the next day both groups would be traveling toward different destinations.

CHAPTER 31



ou should stay and rest for a little bit more!" Charles puffed out his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, but it seems like it isn't in our nature to be able to stay in one place for long," answered Duan, giggling.

It was true. However hard their journeys had been, or however uncertain their return was, they would soon be feeling jittery and anxious to get going on their next adventure. That was true for Olba, and for Land, and also for Clay Judah. They had all caught the bug of adventuring.

"We'll come again, Charles!" Check said self-importantly, and Charles laughed.

"Okay! That's a promise!" answered Charles, shaking Check's small hand. (Check's body had returned to its normal color.)

The same people who had bid them farewell just over two weeks ago were assembled at the castle gates again. The Black Knights' leader, Zamut, and the company commander, Sven

Giesen, as well as Prince Charles and his attendant, Loren, were there.

“So, where are you going?” asked Sven.

Land looked back at Clay Judah. “I’m going wherever he’s going.”

“Like a piece of gum stuck to his shoe, eh?”

“Yup, for now—but I’ll separate from him in time.”

“A band of thieves . . . ?”

“Yeah. But not like ordinary thieves.”

“That’s a given.”

Land laughed at Sven. “Oh yeah, you were an adventurer before, right? Aren’t you thinking about getting back into the game?”

Sven laughed back at him. “Yeah, that’s an attractive proposition. But I’ve chosen to protect *that* person.”

“That person” was the young Prince Charles, who was chatting with Duan and the others.

“Although, before the battle with the Red Knights, I wasn’t really thinking about things like that, and I thought that I could just leave whenever.”

“So, you have someone now that you want to protect?” Land asked.

Sven puffed up his chest in pride and nodded deeply. One could feel the pride he felt as a Black Knight in that pose.

Sven looked at Clay Judah and asked, “Clay Judah, where will you go now?”

“Yeah, I really want to know, too! Where are we headed?” asked Land.

Clay Judah pointed toward the mountain where the Opal was.

“First, I want to travel over that mountain and go to a place farther north from there. I’m thinking of looking for the last opponent the maker of this sword fought.”

“Wow,” said Sven.

“R-really?” answered Land in surprise.

The sword Clay Judah was talking about was the narrow sword he held, which possessed a special power.

“Tsk. I don’t really know why, but never mind! I’ll join you ’til the end! So, do you know the way? Or is the sword gonna show us the way?” asked Land.

Clay Judah laughed. “I have no information about it, but that’s what we’ll find out.”

“Hmm, what’s this all about?” Duan and the others were curious, as well, and they started to ask questions, so Clay Judah answered them.

“To tell the truth, the man who made the Opal is like a brother to the man who made this sword.”

“W-what?”

“There was a troublesome sorcerer, and he was wreaking havoc in different lands. This sword was made to destroy this sorcerer. But the person who made it went missing. In any case, he’s probably not alive anymore—but apparently, the sorcerer is still wreaking havoc. It’s like clutching at straws, but I was thinking of solving these clues one by one.”

“Wow!”

“That sounds exciting!”

While Duan’s and Agnis’ eyes sparkled, Olba came up behind them and grabbed their heads, saying, “Hey, hey—let’s find an adventure more suited to your levels. First of all, Agnis, you have to learn some level one fire spells.”

Agnis puffed up her cheeks in a flash.

Clay Judah laughed and said, “I’m sorry, but to be honest, I’m not that used to traveling in big groups.”

Agnis took it in stride as she puffed out her chest and said, “No, no. It’s okay. I understand. When I next see you, I will



have improved my person and will have grown—as a woman, too!”

“As a woman, too?” asked Duan without thinking.

Olba started to guffaw. “Grown bigger as a woman—does that mean your boobs would have grown? Of course that’s what it means. Of course. But why wait until next time—why not now?”

“Shut up! I’m gonna kill you guys!”

Agnis’ red hair stood on end, and her cheeks went bright red. She chased Duan and Olba around.

“Danger, danger, danger!” cried Check as he flapped his wings and followed after them.

K’nock sat still, following his mistress only with his eyes.

CHAPTER 32



After they had bid farewell to Edward Zamut and also to Sven, Clay Judah stood next to his warhorse, Air, and said, "Well, shall we get going?"

"Oh!" Agnis came running over in a hurry. Duan came running, too. And then, they both bowed at the same time.

"Thank you very much! Thanks for all your help."

"Thank you very much!"

Clay Judah laughed softly, shaking his head side to side.

"The pleasure's all mine. It was fun. Duan, you are gifted with a special power. Remember the Opal who taught you that, okay?"

Duan nodded dramatically.

"Agnis, I'm sure you'll be a fantastic sorcerer one day. Take pride in your pure focus, and be confident in your powerful spirit."

Agnis listened and nodded as she desperately held back her tears. "We'll meet again, won't we?"

Clay Judah placed his hand on Agnis' cheek. It brought back the romance and the feelings that she had been trying to suppress in her heart.

"I'm sure of it. And when it happens, I wonder whether I'll recognize you. Maybe you will be too grown up for me to recognize!" He spoke jokingly, but there was unforgettable warmth in his voice.

Land leapt onto the horse that Duan gave him with ease and said, "Okay then, we'll head off first. Bye!"

But he stopped and looked back. "Olba!"

"Yeah?"

"I totally forgot."

"What?"

"What? You don't remember?"

"What is it?" asked Olba.

Land chuckled. "Oh well. Never mind then. Take care!" He kicked the belly of his horse and off they went.

"What was that all about? Freak," Olba said, when something suddenly hit him. "Oh shoot! The payment! Friggin' heck—I forgot. I can't believe I forgot!"

"What happened?" Duan asked to the fuming Olba, but Olba just shrugged his shoulders.

"Tsk. Never mind. I suppose he never got payment either—well, shall we get going, too?"

"Yeah, okay. Well then!"

It was the second goodbye. Charles squeezed Duan's hand with both of his and asked, "Duan, we'll meet again, won't we?"

Duan laughed and squeezed back. "Your Highness, I promise. Like I said, this place has become my second home!"

"Oh right. Yeah, of course! Come back whenever you want. I'm sure I will have grown when you next see me. Oh, and I've seriously started to train in sword fighting!"

“Really?” Duan asked.

Standing beside Charles, Sven Giesen nodded. “Yes. He’s been really eager and has improved drastically.”

“Duan, your sword skills have really improved recently, too!” Agnis said.

Duan scratched his head. “Well, it’s nothing really.”

But then, his expression turned serious quickly, and he said to Charles, “Really, I never enjoyed sword-fighting practice—but once I gained a little confidence, my body started to move a little better. I feel like maybe my body automatically put the brakes on for me without my realizing.”

Agnis joined in, “Yes, that’s true. That’s something I’ve noticed for the first time recently, too. Putting those brakes on and taking them off and controlling them by yourself—that’s when you can stand on your own two feet! But that’s what’s difficult.”

“Yes, yes. Prince Charles, good luck to the both of us!”

“Yes!”

The two of them shook hands firmly.

Agnis joined in, too, saying, “Me too, me too!” as she placed her hand on top.

“Me too! Me too!” Check also placed a hand on top.

Happy laughter echoed around again.

It was early one winter morning, and the cold was so bitter that it nipped your fingers, but Duan and the others felt warm in their hearts with the thought and anticipation of a new adventure. The wind was still a little strong, but the sky was deep and clear, and they could see all the way to the top of the mountain, where the Opal of Ice and Snow was.

The mountain range was basking in the morning light and shone a brilliant white.

BERTRAMY RATS:



Nicknamed Fear Rats, these monsters are just under twelve inches long. They have eerie thin red eyes that look like pieces of string, which makes them look like they are grinning.

They are like regular rats, but when you are bitten by these monsters, you'll go insane for a few hours. Whomever you see will seem to be attacking you, and you will be overcome with paranoia. There are incidents of teammates killing one another.

The surface of their fur shines black, but this is because they ooze an oily substance. For this reason, they are able to squeeze through narrow gaps and are also resistant to

heat and cold. However, they are weak against fire, and if for some reason they catch fire, they will burn up in an instant.